

Finding the “Can” in Cancer

By: Allen Kruer

My mom was diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer in the middle of May 2018. Some Mother’s Day gift, that was. It was just another spring day—birds chirping, breeze blowing, sun shining. However, this seemingly normal day rapidly and drastically affected my life. My mom called the entire family into her room for what I thought was a typical family meeting. I can still hear the hopefulness clash with uncertainty in her voice as she broke the news.

“I have cancer, but most importantly, I’m going to be okay.”

When I first heard this, I experienced a sort of denial. These kinds of terrible things have never happened to me, only to other people. The world—and even time itself—seemed to come to a grinding halt as I came to the harsh realization of what my mom had just said. After being thrust into this seemingly new world, all I could do was try to carry on with my daily routine. However, not even the barrage of homework, projects, and end-of-year finals could distract me from the severity of my mom’s situation. At the time, I was so paralyzed by shock that I was oblivious to the sudden changes this would bring to my life.

I was used to my mom being there for me in all aspects of my life. Even with four kids, she managed to cheer us all on in our after-school activities. This is what made her absence all the more noticeable. As her doctor’s appointments became more and more frequent, I saw less and less of her at many of my extracurriculars. She had a double mastectomy the day before my 15th birthday, and two more crippling surgeries followed later that year. For obvious reasons, she couldn’t watch me blow out my birthday candles, pump the imaginary brakes as I learned to drive with my newly obtained permit, or even watch me strut into school on my first day of sophomore year.

While I knew my mother said she would be fine in the end, I had a constant fear of losing her. With all the surgeries, I speculated that there may have been complications or unforeseen situations involving the treatments. The possible risks that came with all the surgeries, medications, and side effects added to the already extreme anxiety of knowing my mother was struggling through such a hard time. I had already experienced a time without her, and I was afraid I’d lose her forever.

My mom’s absence not only affected certain milestones of my life but my day-to-day life as well. Relatives rushed me to my daily activities, and my essays had only one pair of analytical eyes proofreading instead of two. Seeing my dad take on all kinds of responsibilities himself—such as escorting my siblings and me to our unending list of activities and becoming somewhat of a chef through the countless nights of fixing dinner—I decided I should take on some extra duties to help out as much as possible. I began supervising my younger siblings’ homework, helping them face fractions for math class, examine ecosystems for science class, and produce

paragraphs for English class. As soon as I was able to drive, I picked up even more slack by chauffeuring my siblings to their activities.

Although just about everything involving cancer is horrific, there were some unexpected benefits hiding in the cracks. For instance, a close-knit relationship with my siblings sprouted and blossomed through the long nights of homework. The chatty car rides with my relatives cultivated a much greater sense of family and allowed me to better understand my roots. I was even able to reinforce my self-confidence through my increased independence. As far as life lessons go, I experienced one of the most valuable first-hand: don't take time spent with loved ones for granted. Any moment with them could be the last in this uncertain world, so I've learned to appreciate even the smallest of interactions.

Finally, I've been offered one of the strongest role models I could ever have. Even after seven surgeries, daily radiation therapy, surgical complications, medically-induced side effects, and almost two years of fighting through pain, my mom still has the strength to continue on with her daily life, teaching and inspiring students of future generations. I truly admire her perseverance and determination, and I try hard to emulate her. As my mom always says, "We can get through this. There's even a 'can' in cancer."