

Why me? What did I do to deserve this? These were a few of the many questions I had when I was diagnosed with leukemia in May 2014. Coming from a Catholic household, I always believed God had a greater plan and purpose for everything in our lives. In the days and months following my diagnosis, that no longer seemed to be true. I could not fathom God wanting to put anyone through the rigors of weekly chemotherapy treatments, spinal taps, and blood transfusions. With seemingly no purpose for all of my struggles, I was hopeless and running out of fight.

During the most challenging phase of my three and a half year battle, I spent anywhere from 2 to 4 days in the hospital every other week receiving high-dose medications. My parents did not want me to spend any time at the hospital alone, so they took turns sleeping on the couch with me at night. I did not think anything of this until I saw a few other kids in their rooms alone. It was heartbreaking to see the sadness and despair on the faces of these young kids. Not having anyone to accompany them seemed to make it even worse. This was the turning point for me because I realized how fortunate I was. I had a family who would do anything to make my hospital stays and treatments better. I had an entire school community cheering me on and making sure I knew I was not alone in this fight. I assumed every kid battling cancer had those things, but seeing the empty hospital rooms showed me that was not the case at all.

As I started to appreciate things like exercising, playing a short game of catch, or even stomaching a delicious meal, an amazing thing happened. By focusing on the good stuff I still had in my life, the difficult days, weeks, and months became a little bit easier and went by a little quicker. Of course, I had mornings where I was too sick and weak to get out of bed; every cancer patient has those. Fortunately, I had a family and support system that I could rely on to carry me

through those tough days, and they did just that. After a tough three and a half year battle, I rang the cancer-free bell on September 21st, 2017.

For many cancer patients, the ringing of the bell signifies the end of their journey with cancer. That is where I expected my journey to end, but the image of those children alone in their rooms kept coming back to me over and over again. One of the most significant factors that led to my successful recovery was knowing how many people were rooting for me. It made me want to push through the dark days even harder because I was not just fighting for myself; I was fighting for an entire community. How many more kids would have a successful fight if they also knew there were people out there rooting for them? That is a question my family and I did not want to leave unanswered, and the one that led to the creation of our non-profit On My Team16.

Our organization's mission is to comfort and support pediatric patients and families through athletics. My primary role, and the one I enjoy most, is meeting with these kids and showing them what they are going through is beatable. One day, I had the pleasure of visiting Blair, who was diagnosed with lymphoma at 13. Like myself, Blair is a baseball player and had the game that he loves taken away from him. I showed him that I got back to playing again despite my illness, and he would do the same. While recovering, Blair became an "honorary" member of my college team and hung out with us before and after games. We provided Blair with a sense of team and community and showed him that many people were cheering him on and supporting him in his fight. Blair eventually completed his treatment protocol and made his way back to the baseball diamond the following year. To date, we have raised over \$100,000 to help patients like Blair across the country.

Through my interactions with Blair and dozens of other kids over the past four years, I have realized that my purpose in life is to use my cancer experiences to help and inspire those facing a similar battle. For a while, I was unsure what career would allow me to do that. However, as our non-profit grew, I kept hearing how much of a nightmare dealing with the insurance companies and regulations associated with them was. Sorting out these issues took a lot of time for parents who were already trying to juggle a job and caring for their sick child. I could see how much unnecessary stress was being added to their already hectic lives and wanted to help.

My goal in pursuing a law degree and becoming an attorney is to work in the health care sphere of law and advocate for patients like Blair or myself. When an insurance company says medication is not necessary and therefore not covered, I do not want a mother or father taking time away from caring for their child to resolve the issue. Instead, I want to be the one fighting for them, just as so many have fought for me. My illness and experiences through my non-profit will allow me to understand what they need during such a difficult time.

Why me? That was my question on May 29th, 2014, after receiving my diagnosis. Six years later, I now say why not me? I have the opportunity to use my experiences with cancer to make a difference. What more could I ask for? I am excited to start on this journey towards becoming a health law attorney.