

An Unusual Experience:

Before you read about another teen's experience with cancer, you're expecting a detailed reenactment of the long struggle. That's not the case with me. I can't say that I have a vivid memory of my experience. Three times cancer has created an obstacle for me and my family, and I feel like this unusual experience has been with me for these fifteen years of my life, but I've walked away from each experience with mere scars.

Cancer has a very malevolent connotation. It's often accompanied by details of the harmful treatment, emotional distress and many drawbacks for the victim. If anything, I felt like cancer's given me thickened skin. At fourteen months, if anyone struggled, it was my family. My mother spent six months in the hospital with me—changing my diapers in the ICU, no doubt. But, unlike myself, she's felt the effects of cancer in a traumatizing nature. If I complain of a headache, she worries. Where as my greatest concern is a long, boring x-ray or arranging a trip to Los Angeles for the never-ending check-ups.

It makes me feel awfully spoiled. While my family is terror-struck by any announcement of a surgery, I tend to take the news casually. Mostly, cancer has been a—as typical as it sounds—moral lesson, as well as a test of patience. Going back to Children's, after having been there a week earlier for the most trivial news, frustrated me. It happens again and again. I've rushed to get my license for the sake of saving myself from taking the taxi. Whether cancer's traumatized my mother of the freeway too, I don't know. But arranging trips to LA is probably one of my most-hated aspects of this never-ending story. Another is feeling perfectly healthy, but having constant doctor appointments “just to be safe”.

I was yet to learn how much danger I was in. At eight, I had once again been struck by cancer. So I had my kidney removed and left the hospital later with a scar across my stomach. A month afterwards, my mom was required to give me shots every evening. I could hardly tell you the technical terms for all these ordeals, as my mother refuses to remember and then, inform me on the situation. But more because I was hardly aware of the seriousness of my situation. Until I turned fifteen, I was almost oblivious of my ill fortune. I knew I underwent treatment as an infant, but again, I had no memory of it. However, after occasional migraines, I was finally going to understand how terrible the situation was.

For three years, I'd had excruciating migraines. They were accompanied by nausea, dizziness, numbness—the works. I felt like a menopausal woman. I'd lie in bed for about three hours, unable to rest. My mother was at loss of how to treat me. She tried to feed me and failed to cure the migraine. Only heavy medicine doses relieved me—those of 500-1000 milligrams, sometimes more. Even with the over-dosage of medicine, the horrible migraine seemed to last for hours. Vomiting seemed to be my only relief. At times like this, I felt helpless. But the emergence of this burden only occurred occasionally—every six months or so—and it lasted one day at the most. That's what made a migraine of mid-October of last year abnormal. I'd had the usual symptoms, but

this time, I'd been ill through the night and until the next day. Finally, my mother, hardly able to admit I needed hospitalization, had been convinced that she needed to take me to the emergency room (of St. Jude in Fullerton of Orange County). And those ten minutes lasted for an eternity before I was administered, and where my mother, uncle and I waited for hours (I, in bed, of course) before we were transferred to CHLA.

I'd gone through everything you could imagine in terms of medical procedures. But when I was told that I would stay over-night, things became grave. Predictably, we were later informed that I had a brain tumor. I, with my priorities all out of order, was relieved to have an excuse not to go to school. My mom must have been imploding with emotion. And yet, we were really fortunate. I'd gotten a tumor in the simplest nature. Sure, it was malignant, but all in the same spot. It was removed so simply (at least on my part) and I didn't even under-go treatment. No chemo, no loss of hair, no radiation—just the regular check-ups, more often. I also was relieved of a whole 3-months' worth of school. I missed half of my sophomore year for this reason. Yet, I don't look at this experience as a draw-back, but an opportunity to understand my case.

I seem to be a tumor magnet. I've had a series of perspectives on this. Overall, I'm pretty optimistic. Basically, I've been diagnosed with cancer three times and I've been disabled in no way. I get odd, confused stares from children who don't seem to understand why I have a scar across my eyebrow, but even that seems trivial to me. I've had a minor tumor removal this past month as well. The stay at the hospital was the only thing I could bear no longer. I guess I can tolerate a couple of needles, but the thought of all the harmful medicines that are flushed into me seems to bother me. I don't feel I've been traumatized emotionally, but I'm sure I experience symptoms resulting from chemo and radiation. My height may have been affected by radiology, and I've recently been introduced to a program known as Individualized Learning Program (IEP), and again, I feel some distress over my past. Being different has never bothered me, but I've always feared that my experience with cancer would separate me from the norm. Learning's something that I'm passionate about. There lies my chance in life. And I've been salvaged three times in my life, there must some purpose for me after all this.

Organizations like Teen Impact create a sense of unity among fellow cancer survivors. We all relate in this struggle. And it's assuring to know that Teen Impact's a place where you could discuss all your misgivings. I've met people I wouldn't normally imagine meeting outside Teen Impact. Cancer's a cause that many people are concerned about. It helps create exciting retreats for our tight group. Not only have I met people I'd never imagined meeting, but there have been several retreats that allowed me to do things I probably wouldn't have normally done either. It's comforting to have a group of adults and kids who all understand each other. Cancer and illness will always dominate my life in some way, but through Teen Impact, that's become a less intense subject. So many people have triumphed over this ordeal and Teen Impact has been an ideal program in supporting all these survivors.