Huntington High School
2013 Relay For Life Opening Ceremony
Senior Molly Prep’s Keynote Address

I stand before you today wearing two shirts, each representing a different part of my life. I begin with my purple shirt, on November 30, 2002. On that day, at the age of seven, I was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Cancer. I don’t remember being told I was “sick.” I simply knew that I had cancer, and that I had to beat it; I didn’t consider any other options.

November 30th had started out pretty normally. I was going for a regular checkup at the doctor; I had been sick and had just stopped taking a certain medicine. The doctors did a standard checkup, but said they had found something “odd.” They weren’t sure what it was, so they suggested we take a closer look. To be honest, I can’t remember a lot about that day. I do remember there was a whirlwind of tests, needles, and beeping IVs which comprised the background noise to that day, which would go on to define my life over the next few years.

My parents and I had first waited in a small and barren waiting room that contained a hospital bed, sink, medical disposals, and a glove dispenser. My dad tried to make me laugh by blowing the gloves up into “balloons.” Even in moments of extreme stress and worry my parents were always looking out for me. Still, the tension was palpable. Waiting felt like an eternity. Doctors came in and out. Each asked the same questions over and over again, and told us little to nothing about what was going on.

As I said, I don’t remember being told that I had cancer. I can only remember knowing. I don’t remember the reactions of my parents, nor my own response. At the time, I think I realized I had to be “the strong one,” for everyone’s sake. Not exactly a burden, more of an obligation. I didn’t fully understand the magnitude of what having cancer meant either. Sometimes I still don’t. Shortly after the doctor’s diagnosis, I was admitted to the hospital, where I would stay in treatment for the next month, before making it home just in time for Christmas.

Though those in-and-out hospital times were tough, I met some of the most amazing people I’ve ever come to know. There was a girl, my age, named Danielle, who was being treated for kidney cancer around the same time of my treatment. If we were ever admitted at the same time, we would request to be roommates. We were often seen as “Thing 1 and Thing 2” of the children’s oncology ward. We would scooter on our IVs, decorate our room with a spider web of toilet paper, and use syringes to squirt water at a poster of “Mike the Snack Man”’s least favorite baseball team. Though Danielle and I lost contact about nine years ago, we ended up reconnecting this past September at a survivor’s reunion. We picked up right where we left off, and we are able to share an unspoken understanding for the full range of feelings a childhood cancer survivor has.

Knowing one person with whom I can have such a bond with is incredible, but even more so is that I have a second person who understands the same things.

Hector and I were a grade apart, and probably wouldn't have gotten to know one another until high school. However, we ended up becoming fast friends under some very unusual circumstances. Hector and I were introduced because we were both children being treated for cancer. Not only that, but Hector went to Jefferson Elementary School too (and ironically he was diagnosed when he was in the same second grade class that I had been diagnosed in the year before). I was lucky to know him then, always smiling and warming the hearts of those with a strained supply of hope around him. I've gotten to know him even better over the years, and, like Danielle, I know he can understand the muddled thoughts I try to express. He inspires me, as that warm smile still hasn't left his face. I missed part of my childhood because of cancer, but Danielle and Hector gave me something that I consider to be, in many ways, even more meaningful than the experiences of most of my peers.

Throughout my treatment, there were countless people, related and not, at my family's side. Even complete strangers were generous in lending a helping hand. When I was discharged from the hospital for the first time (in late December of 2002), I came home to a basement full of Christmas toys- to any and all who contributed to that, I must say you made at least one child’s dreams come true! I thank you for a Christmas that I’ll never forget.

As I got older and frequented the hospital far less, I wasn’t sure how to relate to my past. I wondered how, if it all, cancer should define me; or how my identity could stand separately from my diagnosis. Once I left elementary school, I stopped telling people about my survivorship, other than confiding in a select few. It felt like a dirty secret, a heavy burden. I felt ashamed, without true reason. Mostly, I feared the resurfacing of old pain (that which I’d caused those who had stood by my side through such a horrible experience). I struggled to hold myself together at times, my fears amplifying as the cracks in my composure seemed to grow. Then, at just the right time, Relay For Life entered the picture.

So begins my blue committee shirt. It was my junior year, and after a very emotional Relay For Life kickoff assembly I was reluctant to join this new cancer-focused event. I was emotional and unsure how I would handle myself, not knowing my limits-having never tested them before. I was also unsure as to how I would take to my teachers and peers “finding out” about my past, about my cancer “coming-out,” of sorts. With some persuasion from close friends, I became a team member. I took baby steps in my involvement. When signing up as a survivor online, I actually had to ask my mom what my diagnosis date was, I didn’t know because I’d avoided the topic of my cancer for so long. I went on to fundraise through emails, and even managed to ask some family members in person. I soon realized I wanted to be more involved, and became a team co-captain. Though I was taking on a larger role and building up confidence and courage leading up to Relay on June 9th, I was still dreading the Survivor Lap, which I knew would be one of the first things to take place at the event. The Survivor Lap would mean having to walk, purple-survivor-shirt-ed, in front of everyone attending Relay. I didn't think I was capable of something so public.

The night before Relay, I stayed up late wondering how much of a survivor I really was. Wasn't it the doctors who did all the work? My parents who bore the brunt of the pain? The pure luck of medicine, probability, and science being on my side? Walking the Survivor Lap, entirely venerable for those 400 meters, would I be able to stay composed? Was I as brave as people seemed to claim I was? I didn't see myself as brave then; I felt like a coward. The thoughts swirling in my mind were endless. After awhile though, I was able to fall into a fitful sleep.

When I awoke, it was June 9th, and time to Relay. That afternoon I busied myself getting things in order; anything to distract me from the looming decisions I wished to avoid. At around 6:00 that evening, an announcement sounded, something along the lines of: "Attention all Relayers: Please report to the track for opening ceremonies and laps." The time to choose had arrived. Before I could even consider the possibilities of escape, Ms. Pazienza, my team's chaperone who had survived breast cancer, held up her purple shirt and said, “I will if you will.” How could I say no?

Wearing our symbols of survival, we walked to the track and listened as speakers shared their stories of how cancer impacted their lives. I marveled at their composure and strength, and wondered if the same was possible for me. Before I could give it much thought, the speeches ended and the survivors were told to get into place for the start of the Survivor Lap. I stepped onto the turf lanes, was handed a banner, and began to walk. I worried that with that first step I’d cry, or scream, or collapse right in the middle of the track. I never imagined that I’d feel joy course through my veins. Walking with purple-clad survivors, I couldn’t help but smile. I was alive. Although not everyone diagnosed with cancer has the same outcome, I knew that by participating in Relay for Life I was making a difference. At the end of the lap, many of my classmates ran up to me, stunned to discover my hidden past. They didn’t realize that I was equally surprised with my newfound ability to say, “I survived cancer,” not only without fear, but with pride. I felt liberated of my burden.

Walking the Survivor Lap was only the beginning. That night I went on to run ten miles. Forty laps; every step barefoot. I wanted to embrace such newfound life with the wind in my hair, the sweat down my back, and the refreshing night air filling my lungs. The pounding of my exposed soles mimicked the mantra in my head: I’m alive. I’m alive. I’m *alive*.

That night, in the midst of the joy of celebrating the lives of those we love and those we’ve lost, the melancholy of remembering those who are no longer with us, and taking the vow to fight back against this horrid disease, our community was able band together for a night that way beyond healing, inspirational, and not to mention fun. I’m here before you today almost ten and a half years since my diagnosis, cancer-free and a proud survivor. Having both of these shirts together has allowed me to see that I can stand independently of my past, while still letting it be a part of me.

It wasn’t until June 10th last year, after the Relay grounds were cleaned and cleared that I made the connection between the many laps I ran and the leukemia I fought. The Survivor Lap didn’t define my run that followed, but that first step did ignite something. Yes, my cancer shaped me, but it’s far from the only thing that makes me who I am. Cancer was only one lap of my life; I still have many miles left in me to run.

I’m honored, humbled, and proud to see you all here tonight. It’s rewarding as an event chair to have months of planning come together successfully. It’s also comforting as a survivor to know that I have a community that stands behind me and other individuals and families affected by cancer. I ask one thing of everyone here tonight: please take a moment to seriously consider Relay’s motto. Don’t ever forget to celebrate, remember, and fight back!