



## Gaining Strength and Focus From Hardship

Darcy Alimenti

Three members of my family have been diagnosed with cancer in the past five years. During the fall of my freshman year of high school, my older brother was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. His health began to deteriorate in August 2006. My mother would take him to the hospital weekly, insisting that the doctors run every test on her ill-ridden son. Chris's diagnosis in November 2006 accounted for his rapidly failing health and provided treatment options that would hopefully restore his once lively appearance and attitude. Now, five years after his diagnosis

It was if my eyes were shielded from anything positive and all I could see was darkness. Why my family? Why my brother? Why me? Is he going to die? These thoughts constantly pounded my brain.

and less than a year from completion of treatment, I am able to call Chris's cancer a blessing. During his intensive and long protocol, my focus was on how unfair this diagnosis was. It was as if my eyes were shielded from anything positive and all I could see was darkness. Why my family? Why my brother? Why me? Is he going to die? These thoughts constantly pounded my brain, drawing me deeper into self-wallowing and pity. And, with each obstacle, whether it was a grand mal seizure, a near-deadly rash, or some other allergic reaction, I would dive deeper into this darker state. It took me a year to finally be able to say my brother has cancer without bursting into tears. And, within two years, I was beginning to feel alive again as I watched my brother gain strength with each new day.

Just when life felt finally safe and calm, my mother's health began to fail. She could

not walk, let alone lie down, without experiencing intense shooting pain throughout her body.

In November 2008, my father, who no longer could watch my mother in such an excruciating state, took her to the emergency room and insisted they run every scan. The doctors discovered a tumor that was suppressing her spinal cord down to the size of a ribbon and another tumor that had managed to embed itself into her spine. The doctors were amazed that my mother was not paralyzed and immediately scheduled surgery, put her on bed rest, and began scanning the rest of her body in search of the origin of her cancer. With each new scan, new metastases were found: lungs, kidney, liver, femur, lymph nodes, spleen, and pelvic bone.

It took the doctors a few days before they came up with her diagnosis: uterine-based leiomyosarcoma. Her cancer prognosis was very poor; she had a very rare stage IV cancer with unusual metastases. All I cared about was ensuring that my mother would not die. One night, in particular, I remember lying next to my mother, sobbing into her shoulder, demanding that she not die, and declaring how unfair our life was. My mother, who is a pillar of strength, lay there stroking my hair and reminded me of life's blessings: your brother is two years into his treatment and is responding to his treatment, we have a house, your father

has a job, every night you have food on your table, you have clothes, you have the opportunity to go to college, you have a family that loves you, and you have a God who loves you.

She was right; I have so much to be grateful for. As much as I wanted to hide under the covers and protect myself from the world, I knew I could not. And with this new mentality, I took on the role of caregiver for not only my brother, but now also for my mother: flushing and heparin locking my brother's peripherally inserted central catheter line, driving my mother back and forth from radiation and chemotherapy, rubbing my brother's back as he regurgitated the entire contents of his last meal, and performing any other necessary chores. It was this experience in caregiving that instilled in me a passion for nursing.

I am currently in my third year of nursing school and work as a nurse extern at Duke Oncology Medical Center through the Duke Professional Nursing Assistant Program. Ultimately, I desire to obtain my nurse practitioner certification in oncology and work in an oncology clinic using my knowledge and personal experiences to care for patients.

Then, in January 2009, my grandmother (who lives with us) was diagnosed with her third cancer, chronic lymphocytic leukemia. With this new diagnosis, my fears were reborn. But now I knew I was able to overcome any fears and I had so much to be thankful for. Nothing was too scary for me now. Nothing was

Darcy Alimenti is a student in the School of Nursing at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. The author takes full responsibility for the content of this article. The author did not receive honoraria for this work. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author or editorial staff. Alimenti can be reached at [dea5ga@virginia.edu](mailto:dea5ga@virginia.edu), with copy to editor at [CJONEditor@ons.org](mailto:CJONEditor@ons.org).

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/12.CJON.E123-E124