

Survivorship: What it means to me.

For most people survivorship starts later in life but for me it's all I've ever known. When I was 2 years old, I was diagnosed with stage 2 rhabdomyosarcoma. Being that young with such a serious disease I never realized that I was a survivor, that's just what I did, survive. As I got older, I thought it was normal to go to the hospital frequently because I had never known anything different. That is, until I started school.

Starting pre-school with a bald head and scars all over my body, I felt different from the pretty girls with long hair who had the energy to run and play. I was bullied and became ashamed of how I looked. I was bony, bald, and helpless of my condition. I would go home crying almost every day to my mom about how I hated how I looked. My mom had been diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer around the same time I was diagnosed, so we went through treatments together. She would constantly remind me how precious I was and how beautiful I am no matter how I looked on the outside because "it's on the inside what matters". It was only after my mom shaved her head that I began to realize that being a survivor wasn't about beauty and appearance but about strength and courage.

After six months of chemotherapy and radiation treatment I went into remission and I can still remember the excitement I felt that I no longer needed to be poked all the time. I felt as if I had been given a second chance at life and I was not going to waste it. I woke up every day happy, ready to attempt new things. I grew up and became everything the doctors told me I never could be. I was in dance, gymnastics, softball, soccer, and cheerleading. Everything was great for 6 years until my mom took a turn for the worse.

I became her caregiver at 9 years old; she had been given six months to live and could no longer receive treatment because her cancer had spread. My mom passed away June 21, 2009, a day forever engrained in my memory. She fought and survived for 8 long years. I was heartbroken and angry at the world because she didn't get to live like I got to. Surviving wasn't just about me anymore; it became about the both of us. I promised myself that I would continue to survive in honor of my mom and everyone else who fought or is fighting.

Time passed as I continued to attend my annual screenings when they found a lump in my right breast. I was 17 and scared out of my mind. Little did I know they had been doing genetic testing on my grandma and had found a rare genetic disorder called Li-Fraumini syndrome. I tested positive and instead of a biopsy they had both of my breasts removed and reconstructed right away. The pain of the surgery was horrible and hard to go through alone and the only thing that had gotten me through it was knowing that I had beat cancer once and I could do it again because I am a survivor. Since then I have completely healed and gone to college to be a nurse.

Survivorship isn't temporary for me, it's a lifelong journey. I will always be a survivor despite my background and genetics. It's my lifestyle, and I will continue to fight for everyone who has lost their life to or is currently battling cancer. Survivorship means living and fighting every day for myself, those who have lost the fight, and those fighting. Becoming the best version of myself I can possibly be without fear of reoccurrence. Facing reality and becoming stronger. Surviving means I get the chance to help people who are just like me and making a difference. Becoming a survivor isn't a choice, surviving to thrive is.