

Each of us here today in this group of scholarship awarders and awardees has a story to tell. Some particular event brought each of us here. Something out of the ordinary happened in our lives. Usually, our story was thrust upon us. We did not choose the events to happen, but they did, and they changed our lives.

I'd love to hear all of your stories, but today, I guess, it's my turn, to tell mine. Although it has players in it other than myself, I am telling it from my perspective. Today, it's my story.

1997. That's when it began. But first I'm going to backtrack a little to sort of color in the background.

I met my husband in California during those heady days of the late 1960s. He was in my organic chemistry class, although he eventually became a carpenter. In the early 1970s we moved to Colorado so that I could go to graduate school in biochemistry here at CU. We liked the area so much that we bought 3 acres outside Lyons and planned a home on a plot of land that has amazing views.

Our son was born in 1980. Also in 1980 my husband began work on our house. Although we didn't have much money, we strove to build an environmentally friendly home from materials that were non-toxic. When my son was 1 year old, we moved in. Our son blossomed, and then we had a daughter, and she blossomed too. Life was full, lots of laughter, some tension, gorgeous days, healthy children, us parents off to work each day and then home to family. I always have liked to cook, and tried to feed my kids only healthy foods. Each of my kids had special talents, and while we enjoyed each day with them, we also gazed to the future and wondered what interesting things they would do when they grew up and became adult members of society, what kind of future would they create for themselves.

While raising the kids, I worked full time here at CU, in the chemistry department. I ran the organic chemistry teaching labs, a job I held for 25 years. The job was more of a passion than "just a job" - at least most of the time. I loved playing in the lab on new experiments . . . watching reactions change color . . . analyzing the results . . . writing and publishing professional articles. . . creating an organic chemistry web site . . . talking to students . . . helping students create their own futures. I always felt that a good day was one where I learned something new, and often what I learned was from the students.

Between work and home, life was grand. We never really thought about it, but we assumed it would just continue.

So, 1997. My son was 16, my daughter 12. It's April. April 17, actually.

I was at work, I was busy but happy with 80 students in lab, teaching assistants and students all needing things from me, students doing projects and all sorts of interesting

puzzles to solve. The day before I had gone to the doctor with my son, as he had been a little tired lately, too tired to go to school or run up the stairs two at a time. I didn't think much about it.

The phone rang. It was the nurse practitioner from the doctor's office, asking for me. She said: "I hate to tell you over the phone, but we think your son has leukemia. . ." In tears herself, she explained that she wanted my son at the hospital ASAP. She had already booked a room for him. Within a few hours we were at Childrens Hospital. The oncologists re-ran the tests, and 2 hours later, we know, yes, it is leukemia. Cancer. My son had cancer.

Shock.

Your life stops and starts again.

What can you do? You deal with it, somehow. You grieve inside but you find out what you have to know and have to do to help your son.

You don't have much time to think anyway because you are shoved onto a fast train that you never wanted to take in the first place. Within 2 hours of confirmed diagnosis you have been told the following:

At 7:30 the next morning, your son will have surgery to check his bone marrow for cancer cells, have a spinal tap to check the spinal fluid for cancer there, and have chemotherapy in his central nervous system.

He will have a mediport implanted. We had to choose which type of mediport, and I had no idea what they even were.

Your son will have to be home-schooled for the rest of eleventh grade.

He will have to have chemotherapy for over 3 years, beginning tomorrow.

You have to decide whether to enter an investigative study or to do the standard protocol within 72 hours from this moment.

It all seems so impossible. But you find yourself pulling up a part of yourself that you never knew existed. You find yourself trying to protect family members and close friends from this terrible news, and comforting them when you do tell them. You find you are able to handle it. You pull out all your survival instincts, doing whatever it takes to protect your family.

You argue a bit with your husband as to who gets to stay on that horrible uncomfortable couch in the hospital room each night with your son. You eat the horrible hospital food. You learn how to grab the throw-up basin in a hurry. You find it hard to leave the hospital and go to your comfy home because your son is not there. You learn to cry in

the shower so that you can look in control when you need to. You know that you will never again take having your child near you for granted.

After the first shock of diagnosis, life settled into a “new normal” routine. The first year of treatment is intense, with weekly visits to Childrens Hospital in Denver. It’s hard to explain how tough it was to watch a purple toxic drug go directly into my son’s veins, a drug that the nurses were ever so careful not to get on themselves. The syringes went into toxic waste. This is the kid that I was so careful to only feed safe foods! What sort of horrible effects might the drug have? But you had to do it to save his life.

One of the hardest parts was seeing him change from a healthy teenager to a sick one. Here’s an excerpt from an email that I wrote: “I’m fine most of the time, but when I am staying home with him and he just sleeps all day and can’t eat, then I want to cry.”

The second and third years of leukemia treatment were less intense, but still required not only daily oral chemo and monthly steroid pulses but monthly visits to the hospital for an IV drug and spinal taps. His treatment continued through his second year of college, here at CU. During those years, he felt tired and yucky a lot of the time. But he did it, so that he could continue to create the future he wanted.

All of the hospital visits meant that I had to take time off work. The chemistry department was very helpful, allowing me to schedule around the appointments or work from home when possible. I wrote a handbook for organic chemistry lab students from my home computer, and thus was able to be there while my son recovered from treatment sessions. I will be forever grateful to the chemistry department and the university for supporting me through that difficult time. Not only that, when I was offered co-authorship on an organic chemistry lab text, the department encouraged me to take on the project. This project provided me with royalties, and it became my dream to use these moneys to pay back, to help childhood cancer survivors.

During my son’s treatment, I joined an online discussion group for parents of children with cancer. Today, I still help administrate several of these discussion groups. All of the parents in the support groups say that their cancer kid has a very special and unique outlook on life. These kids went through hell and came out the other side intact and knowing their own strengths and also knowing what is important in life. One parent commented: “He has taught me a lot about life. I have learned to treasure each and every day, to make a difference with someone every day I have the opportunity, and to live each day as if it may be my last.” My sentiments exactly.

There are of course late effects of childhood cancer that are not good. I have learned many of the issues of treatment and survivorship of childhood cancer during my time in the online lists.

So now I get on my soapbox:

Childhood cancer is the number one disease-cause of death of children and adolescents in the US. Today, about 70% of children with cancer are cured. It is estimated that one in 500 adults is a survivor of childhood cancer.

Students who had or have cancer may not do well academically. While on treatment they are often unable to attend class, or are too tired from the treatment to study or keep up with homework. They might not do well on college entrance exams. They may not be able to do the extracurricular activities required for merit scholarships. Many of these students will not qualify for traditional scholarships for these reasons. Late effects of treatment can mean that a student has subtle learning disabilities, and while the survivors are bright and eager students, they may not receive good grades in traditional classrooms. Many survivors also have physical disabilities, from avascular necrosis to limb loss to endocrine and heart issues and more. These survivors are often seen by primary care physicians who are clueless in the treatment of late effects of childhood cancer.

Childhood cancer can place a heavy burden on a family's finances. Often, one parent has to stay home to care for the child, possibly quitting their job to do so. Sometimes savings for college are used instead for immediate medical expenses. By the time a survivor applies for college, the family's finances might look okay on paper, but in fact these families might have used up critical savings.

It dawned on me that I could honor both the University that had supported me and survivors of childhood cancer by offering a scholarship for survivors of childhood cancer who attend CU Boulder. Today marks the realization of my dream to give back and to help create futures for these unique individuals by offering a childhood cancer survivor scholarship. The scholarship does not depend heavily on a good grade average, nor is it based on financial need. Instead, it focuses on a student's desire to learn or a strong desire to achieve a particular professional goal.

Off my soapbox and back to my story.

My son went off treatment in 2000. In 2002, he graduated from CU, and was five years in remission. As I looked at my son the college graduate, I thought back to 1997, when I had looked directly in his eyes and told him that they would cure him of cancer.

Five years later, I finally began to believe it myself.

And today, he has done everything I imagined and more, but that is his story. I'm just so glad that he is here to live it.

