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Karman Healthcare Scholarship Essay

It appears to have wings and is shaped like a butterfly. Out of all my scars, the butterfly scar on my chest is my favorite.

I think of this scar as my symbol of rebirth, a second chance at life after my diagnosis of myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS); a rare blood cancer that causes bone marrow failure and is a difficult to treat type of leukemia. I was diagnosed at 13 months old and received a bone marrow transplant (BMT) at the age of two and one half.

For my 21st birthday, I got a monarch butterfly tattoo with my BMT date. For me, butterflies symbolize rebirth, new beginnings and my second chance at life.

In addition to my bone marrow transplant, I had two open heart surgeries while I was in high school to remove a rare benign heart tumor in my left atrium called a myxoma. I received the first of these surgeries one a month before starting my freshman year of high school and the second midway through my sophomore year. This tumor was found during my annual post-BMT cardiology check-up. If I was not a BMT survivor, it likely would not have been found before a serious, life-threatening complication. I think of my cancer diagnosis and resulting transplant as a blessing because the tumor may not have been found in time otherwise. I also got many orthopedic surgeries while I was in middle school.

As a childhood cancer survivor and bone marrow transplant survivor, the effects of treatment impact me in my daily life. I have late effects of treatment (total-body radiation and chemotherapy) because I was treated when I was a toddler when my body and brain were still developing. Some of my late effects are pulmonary fibrosis, reduced heart function, hormone deficiencies, and a learning disability. Since I am a childhood cancer survivor; I am also at risk for developing other cancers and health conditions. In fact, I endured the two open-heart surgeries during high school to remove a benign left-atrial myxoma that could be attributed as a BMT late effect.

Because of these late effects of cancer treatment, I have many resulting health conditions. One of the late effects that impacts me daily is my pulmonary fibrosis. I developed pulmonary fibrosis from chemotherapy and exposure to total-body radiation. Because my body was exposed to the treatment at a young age, my lungs and heart have permanent damage. My lungs have scar tissue from radiation treatment, which developed into pulmonary fibrosis as I become older. My heart also has reduced function and heart damage.

Having pulmonary fibrosis causes me to have difficulty breathing and catching my breath when I exert myself, especially when I am going up inclines, such as stairs and hills, and carry heavy objects, such as a backpack. I will always take an elevator when it is available to me. If there is limited disability access like an elevator, I have to walk up the stairs and my breathing will get very heavy and painful. It will take me multiple minutes to be able to get myself back to normal breathing. My breathing recovery time and oxygen intake is delayed when I get out of breath and it is harder for me to catch up with others when I am walking.

Because I struggle with my pulmonary fibrosis and heart function daily, it has become a mobility disability for me. When needed, I use an albuterol inhaler prescribed to me from my pulmonologist. I use my inhaler as a mobility device to help me to recover my breathing and to more quickly relieve my pulmonary symptoms.

Another significant late effect that I have resulting from cancer treatment is a learning disability. Due to my treatment of chemotherapy and total-body radiation, my brain was affected which resulted in my diagnosis of a learning disability. My learning disability makes it difficult for me to process complex or fast-paced material. It can be hard for me to keep up with class lectures and stay on top of group discussions with classmates. My learning disability has helped to become a better student because I have learned what it takes for me to learn despite it. I know that I need to put in extra effort compared with my peers to achieve my academic goals. This proved to me that although I have learning challenges, I am still capable of educational success.

All of my medical experiences, including currently living with a mobility disability and a learning disability have greatly impacted my personal development, such as my personal qualities, values, and

goals; my ability to empathize and listen to others having compassion for others; and my career aspirations.

I'd like to share this quote I connect with from Robin Roberts (from Good Morning America), a fellow BMT survivor for myelodysplastic syndrome whom I admire.

“Through it all, I learned that strength, true strength, isn’t when you face down life’s challenges on your own. It’s when you take them on by accepting the faith, love, and help of others and knowing you are lucky to have those.”

I would truly say that my inner strength and endurance didn't just come by itself, it developed from all the loving, caring, and faithful people around me. I was comforted to know that I wasn't going through it alone. When going through my treatment, even at such a young age, one thing I remember is trusting the people taking care of me.

I am currently attending Boston University for a Master of Social Work. I know that my being a survivor and living with disabilities as a result of cancer treatment leads me to the social work profession. I would like to give back by supporting pediatric patients and their families during their tough health challenges. My passion is for children and families who face medical challenges and disability. I especially would like to work with pediatric patients who live with a disability as a result of their health condition and how living with that affects their mental health and emotional well-being.

I know that I will bring a level of empathy, understanding, and hope that only a fellow survivor can bring – someone who has walked in similar shoes and is thriving and reaching her goals despite the major obstacles she faced. I want to bring them the *faith, love, and help* that I was so lucky to receive and what makes me a thriving cancer and bone marrow transplant survivor!