

PERSEVERANCE

*How Young People Turn Fear into Hope—
and How They Can Teach Us to Do the Same*

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My Story

This book is the result of one of my lifelong passions—a desire to help kids with life-threatening illnesses. It started when, as a young child, I became immersed in a world intrinsically different from my own. When I was six, I went with my parents to visit Camp Sunshine, a camp run by their friends. Camp Sunshine was and still is a retreat in Casco, Maine, for children with cancer. Even though I had never been through cancer, I began to understand the impact of this disease at a very personal level. During this visit, I had developed a deep connection to children with cancer. Though I didn't know it, that visit was going to change my life, and redefine my concept of courage forever.

Freed from the fear of rejection by their peers and the isolation of their hospital rooms, at Camp Sunshine children facing cancer could just be “normal” kids. From what they told me, the psychological issues faced by most kids going through cancer treatment were ubiquitous. Returning to the camp eight years later when I was fourteen, I was again overwhelmed by the strength and courage of my peers with cancer.

Returning to my “normal” life at home after that second visit was difficult. I was older, and more aware of the campers' struggles. That year, I founded Carolyn's Compassionate Children (CCC), an organization to help children with cancer and other serious illnesses.

CCC began as a pen-pal program connecting children who had cancer with their healthy peers. When I was fifteen, my foundation became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. It was a success, but I wanted to do more.

CCC has flourished in the nine years since I founded it. CCC has networked more than a thousand kids as pen pals. Over the past seven years, CCC has awarded 100 college scholarships to childhood cancer survivors across the nation. Currently, the mission of CCC is to improve the quality of life for young adult cancer survivors by increasing the opportunity for college access and success.

At the beginning of my spring semester freshman year at Duke University, I worked with a child in a documentary studies class examining childhood illness. The purpose of the class was to help a child facing cancer document his or her life through photography. Each student in the class was paired with one child.

I was paired with a ten-year-old girl, Kadeejah. I visited her at Duke Hospital every day. She smiled regardless of how she felt. She filled the bleakest days with sunshine. She loved to hold my hand. I gave her a teddy bear on her eleventh birthday, St. Patrick's Day.

And then I watched her slowly slip away from me.

The last time I saw her, she was lying unconscious in the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) with the teddy bear in her arms. I kissed her on the cheek and said good-bye.

I came to believe every life has a purpose. Kadeejah and I were brought together for a reason. She taught me the value of *now*—this moment, today. Kadeejah spent every spare moment creating art. She never tired of these projects, and as soon as she finished one creation, she went on to the next. I determined to spread Kadeejah's passion for life to as many people as I could reach. This book is my first step toward realizing this goal.

I'm not sure why I began the book. One day, I took out a yellow legal pad and outlined some ideas for a book that would help children facing cancer. I began interviewing childhood cancer survivors who were in college. When I looked through my notes at the end of the summer, I felt the stories warranted a wider audience.

I interviewed many survivors. Unfortunately I don't have room for all them. To share what I've learned, I have selected twenty college students who have survived childhood cancer. They each tell their stories in their own words, though I've added introductions and conclusions to help you understand where they're coming from.

These personal narratives reveal a new generation, a generation that didn't exist fifty years ago. In those days, childhood cancer was almost always a death sentence. It still can be, though survival rates are improving. Four out of five kids who are diagnosed with cancer achieve that important five-year survival milestone. These survivors are exceptional people, all of them determined to share what they've learned and make the world a better place.

Cancer changed these people forever, and these people changed me forever. We all have journeys into uncharted territories that we must take alone. But I have learned we aren't necessarily alone. No matter how dark the moment, brave souls

have already walked the same path. The purpose of this book is to shine a light on the path each of us takes.

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(For more stories, chats with survivors featured in this book, author book tour information, and more, please visit my Web site at www.carolynrubenstein.com.)