

New *B*eginnings



Surviving Cancer Well

100 Stories by Bill Aron

Maneh Nazarian | 7 years old
Bone Cancer (Ewing Sarcoma), 2007



Maneh's mother, Marine: After we shaved her head, she looked in the mirror and said,

*“I may look ugly on the outside,
but inside Maneh is beautiful.
So don't cry Mommy.”*

“She eventually was laughing and singing,
“Don't you wish your girlfriend was bald like me.”





Sophia Colby | Age 4, Hemophagocytic Lymphohistiocytosis (HLH)
Diagnosed in August, 2005 at 15 months of age

H Sophia's father, Patrick, and mother Bridget: Her disease is often diagnosed posthumously. Testing takes too long and it's often too late. She was only a week and a half away from that point of no return. No one still knows how she survived. Many kids with lesser afflictions have died.

Many things quickly changed. Right away we learned how important relationships with family and friends can be. The day we finally said "yes" to help, the walls were blown off and we realized the goodness of people. This actually allowed people to be empowered to help.

*In the hospital...
Sophia constantly
gave everyone hope
and sunshine."*

There is nothing but good people out there. If we all would take our daily blinders off, and open our eyes, it's a very positive and giving world.

Unfortunately, a lot of people have to go through something horrible to see that.

In the hospital, Sophia was always happy, bouncing around, coloring, and dragging her IV poll around with her. One day, the doctor looked at the nurse and said, "Are you sure we're giving this kid chemo?"

She was such a little social butterfly. She would knock on other patients' doors and get them to come out and play . . . even the teenagers who were depressed. She constantly gave everyone hope and sunshine.

Now whenever something happens, like the kids act up, I know it's going to be over shortly. We have the luxury of seeing so many little gifts that other people don't see. The smell of my daughter's hair in the morning is such a gift. Our daily gift is getting to snuggle in the morning.

Michael Long

Satellite Launch Salesman
55 years old
Colon Cancer, 2003
Cranial Chondro Sarcoma, 2006

“An oncology nurse once told me that she is in that business because she gets to see the best of humanity.”

I was traveling and working a lot internationally, so I was constantly fatigued and had no energy. In fact, I was in France when the doctor got my diagnosis, and no one could find me. It turned out that I was 20% low on blood volume, and probably bleeding internally. So I flew home right away... of course stopping first to get a croissant.

I had surgery immediately to remove a tumor in my colon, followed by 6 months of chemotherapy. The side effects were tough. I felt my life force draining from my body after each treatment. I was taking 6 sleeping pills every night just to get to sleep. Two years later I was having double vision, and went through several doctors before they discovered I had another tumor in my brain. Once again, I had surgery; this time, a very difficult and delicate surgery.

Cancer helped to recalibrate me. I think that only other cancer survivors would understand when I say that it is the best thing that ever happened to me. Once you're in the cancer club, you get to help others with cancer. You cannot put a price tag on that feeling.

An oncology nurse once told me that she is in that business because she gets to see the best of humanity.

In December I was hit by a car, so I have actually had three wake-up calls. Three of my nine cat lives are gone. Yes, I have had a few inconveniences happen to me, but I have my daughters who are the light of my life, and I still get to play soccer. That ain't too shabby.



“You don’t test the strength of the boat until you come up against a huge wave.”

Megan Berry | 22 years old
Thyroid Cancer, March 2006

Kelly Cohen | 20 years old
Leukemia, September 2006

Kelly: Out of 2 million people in the national bone marrow pool, I had 8 matches and 2 perfect matches. I was so lucky. Someone I never knew saved my life. That’s the most amazing gift in the world.

Megan: It is the best-worst thing that ever happened to me. My life had been “hummin” along and the world was at my fingertips. And then it came to a screeching halt. But now I have a better perspective about life. I wouldn’t give it back if I could because I believe that everything happens for a reason, good or bad. I learned at 18 what most people take a lifetime to learn. It made me who I am, and I like the person I am today.

Kelly: I sat for two weeks with my mom and my boyfriend and cried. Then I said, “OK, we’ve had our little pity party, now we will think positively.” My dad explained it best. He said that over all these years, we’ve been building a boat. You don’t test the strength of the boat until you come up against a huge wave. I know now that my family built a really good boat.

Megan: Kelly and I joke with each other... at 18 we got it bad, but at 99 we’ll be really healthy.





Coby Karl

Basketball Player, The Los Angeles Lakers
25 years old
Thyroid Cancer, 2000
Recurrence, 2006

“You can’t ask why. You have to move on.”

During my junior year in college everything was going well. At the beginning of the basketball season I felt a lump on my throat. For a long time, they said it was nothing and not to worry, but later my coach sent me to a specialist who did a needle biopsy and diagnosed it as thyroid cancer. I waited until the end of the season, telling only my coach and my dad, and then had surgery.

When the cancer came back, midway through my senior year, I felt cheated. I had to have surgery again and have 40 to 60 lymph nodes taken out of my neck. In some ways fighting the disease required the same skills I was trained for in basketball. I had to challenge myself to get through the situation; to focus.



It’s all mental. I am a competitive person, and this time I was competing against cancer. Now I know I have to deal with it for the rest of my life.

Just six months after surgery, I was playing opening night for the Lakers. It was much more of a joy and accomplishment for me because of cancer. It puts a new light on your life and the ability to enjoy teammates and friendships. My dad has always taught me to emphasize the little things. He taught me to enjoy my family and my team and all the great things I have in my life that most people don’t have, rather than looking at cancer and all the people who don’t have cancer. If I keep that mindset rather than getting angry at the situation, it makes life so much easier. You can’t ask why. You have to move on.

My dad had prostate cancer the year before I got cancer. I think that was scarier for me because I couldn’t do anything about it. Then when I got cancer, it was one of the lowest points of his life. He said it was a lower point than when he got his own diagnosis.

I think it’s important to enjoy what you have. I probably have 100 great friends; many people can’t say they have one good friend. Eventually, I want to be a coach, and to have a family. It feels good to have a future to focus on and see the possibilities ahead of me.

Kay Warren | Breast Cancer, 2003
Melanoma, 2005

“I can’t control how long I live, but I can control HOW I live.”

Cancer shattered my illusions that I have a long life ahead of me. I may. I may not. I can’t control how long I live, but I can control HOW I live.

One of my mottoes has become “control the controllable and leave the uncontrollable to God.” I don’t get to determine the number of my days, but I can determine the quality of the days given to me.

The most powerful thing you can do for a person is to simply be with them. Sometimes we just need an arm around our shoulders. They stayed with me and represented God to me. I was confused and I didn’t understand. It was as if I was pounding on God’s chest and asking, “Why are you doing this to me?” I couldn’t drive Him away from me. Finally I stopped pounding and leaned on Him and cried.

I never got to the place where I didn’t think God was real. My faith was never shattered. I didn’t understand His ways. Doubt. That was my crisis.

Not only did cancer teach me about suffering on a personal level, it also taught me about the blessings hidden in the suffering. I became aware of how fragile life is, how brief and how holy it is. Knowing life’s fragility causes me to be more intentional, more passionate, more convinced of the sweetness of this moment, and more convinced than ever before that I am here for a reason. I don’t want to waste a second of the time I have been given.

Kay Warren is the Founder of the HIV/AIDS Initiative at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA. She is a Bible teacher, author, and international speaker. Married to Rick Warren, together they founded Saddleback Church in 1980. Kay has authored *Dangerous Surrender*, and *Say Yes to God*, and has co-authored *Foundations*, a systematic theology course used in churches around the world.



Rabbi William Cutter

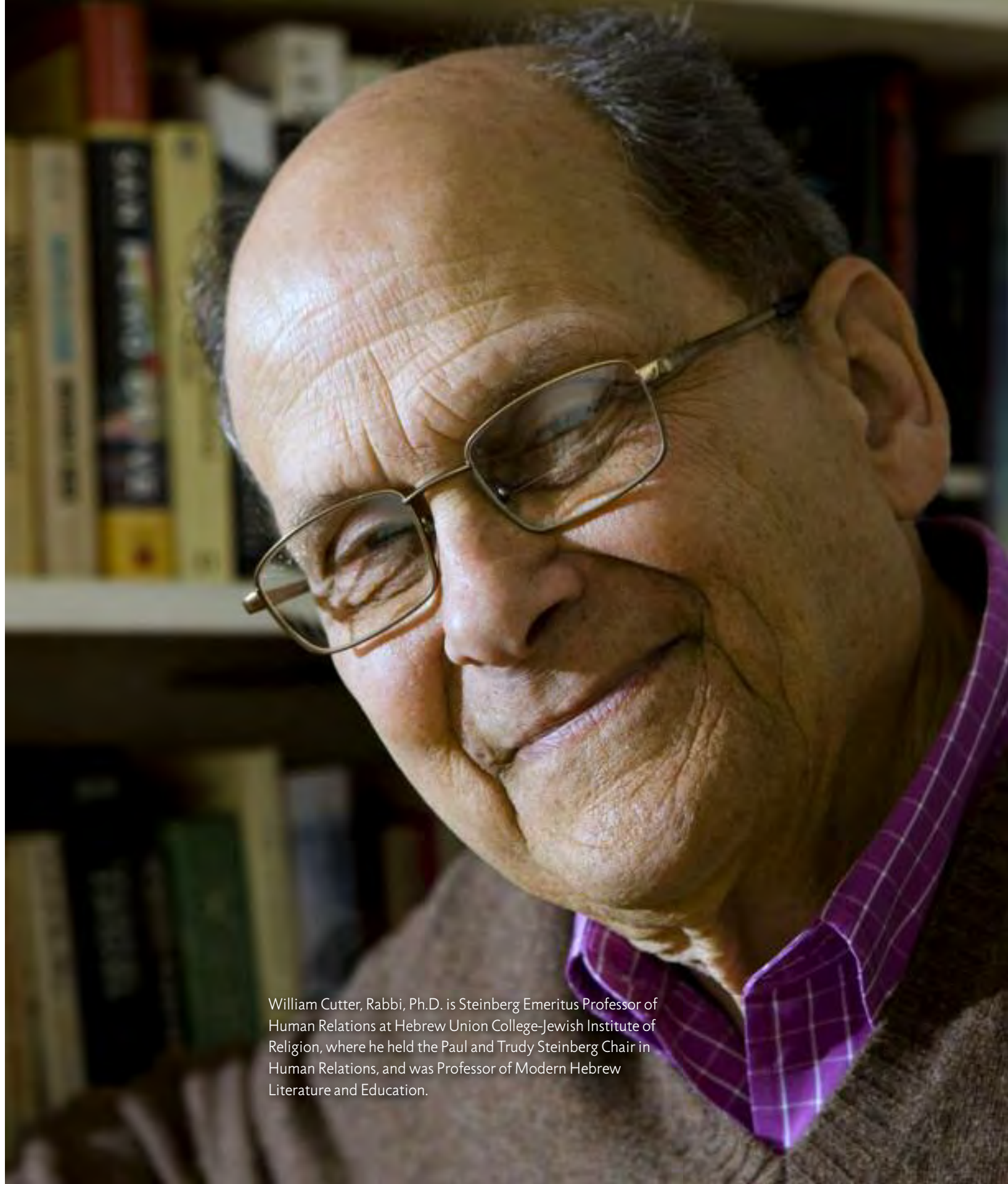
71 years old
1st Heart Attack, 1978
2nd Heart Attack, 1992
3rd Heart Attack, 1997
Angioplasty, 1998
Prostate Cancer, 2000
Recurrence, 2007

“Other things in my life have become more important than my illnesses.”

I’ve been through four life-threatening situations. Oddly enough, I don’t feel precarious. I am living. Other things in my life have become more important than my illnesses, especially my relationships with others and my work. I am conservative and cautious in life, and even though I had been a Rabbi, these experiences of illness caused me to take my religious leadership much more seriously.

Because of my illnesses, I began to spend an enormous amount of time doing pastoral work in hospitals. I started taking students with me, and it turned into an elaborate training program at UCLA.

My emotional reaction to all of this is that I am very glad to be alive. Objectively, I see that life is always precarious, and I accept that my longevity will be shorter than it otherwise would, but I’m okay with that. I am free of the worry.



William Cutter, Rabbi, Ph.D. is Steinberg Emeritus Professor of Human Relations at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he held the Paul and Trudy Steinberg Chair in Human Relations, and was Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature and Education.

“I’m hurting sometimes, but not enough to stop enjoying life.”

Sally Craigen

100 years old
Breast Cancer, 1972
Ovarian Cancer, 2001

I am a two-time cancer survivor, but I never stopped enjoying life – dancing and singing with the choir. I’m still singing today.

People would always say to me, “Sally, you don’t act like you have cancer.” Yes, I’m hurting sometimes, but not enough to stop enjoying life.

Dolly Groves

Holocaust Survivor
Hodgkins Lymphoma, 1998
Breast Cancer, 1998
Cancer of the Tongue, 2006

*“I did something
I always wanted to do...”*

Amid the pain of the treatments for tongue cancer, I thought of my mother, trying to lead me to safety by escaping the Germans during World War II. Being Jewish, our chances were slim. After crossing into unoccupied France, we were caught by the Vichy authorities. Where had my mother found the courage to do what she did? This became my inspiration.

They call me the miracle patient. I have done three cancers. And this has changed my life entirely. I organized my priorities. I completely simplified my life. Everyone goes through transformations, which teach us that “things” are not important. The only “thing” that I do care about now is my health.

I did something I always wanted to do: I started a company called Divine Design by Dolly. We make belly-dancing costumes. It literally saved my life. It’s colorful, glittery, entertaining, and it makes people happy, which makes me happy.



“I turned it into teaching.”

Because I’m a Rabbi, I have important and serious moments of life around me all the time. I handled cancer the way I handle all experiences.

I turned it into teaching. As I was going into chemo, I prayed, “Let me get a sermon out of this.” If I can’t get a sermon out of having cancer, I’m a poor excuse for a Rabbi.

Every time I walk into a hospital room, my cancer is an odd blessing because they know I understand. Cancer confirmed that I was leading the life I should be living. I became settled into my life.

What you learn from an experience like this is inexpressible. It’s the deepest messages of life. The playwright Eugene Ionesco said, “Everything in life is expressible in words except the living truth.”

Samara Wolpe, 13 years old: I looked at all the other kids and thought they were lucky because they didn’t have all this, but I also feel like this has made me stronger. I now think, wow, wouldn’t it be sad not to understand this. When I look at people now, I wonder about their past. I wonder if they understand.





Lilly Padilla | Cooking Instructor
Ovarian Cancer, 2003

It was a time that I will never forget. I had changed both my work life and my romantic life at the same time. I was too busy to pay attention to my symptoms, but I knew something was wrong.

The doctors kept telling me I was fine, but I grew up being pushy, so I argued and convinced them to let me have an ultrasound. They found a lump and I had to have surgery. When I woke up, I saw my mother crying and I knew it was cancer.

My parents had taught me that obstacles in life are going to happen but those obstacles are just there to jump over. My whole life, I remember my father saying, "You can do it. Just jump." Many of my relatives came from Columbia and Spain to help me. They would all say to me: "Today, are you going to get up and learn something, or are you going to stay in bed?"

"I went from a bad experience and feeling depressed to having a wonderful life and being a much stronger person."

I began to fight. I realized that I had not been taking care of my body or my mind. I asked the doctors questions about healthy eating, and I took nutrition classes online. I really started learning and cleaning my heart, my emotions, and my body. I also started painting, journaling, meditation, and yoga. It's hard to try to understand and articulate all the changes, but I completely reprogrammed myself. One day while writing I realized – this is a good thing. Without cancer, I would never have taken a look at these things.

In the beginning the changes were just for myself, to get healthy. Then several people asked me to write a book about food for survivors. So I made notes of all the tips that helped me, and already I am hearing how important it has been for others. I love helping and teaching patients all the things they can do for themselves while they are sick. The best thing we can do is to be an inspiration for other people.

I went from a bad experience and feeling depressed to having a wonderful life and being a much stronger person. I see the better things in life instead of worrying about the little things. I know that the way I think determines how life will happen. If I think with a good emotion, my life will be good. And it is.

Lori Flagg | Nurse Manager, 53 years old
Inflammatory Breast Cancer, 2002

Before I had cancer, in 1999, I became involved in the three-day breast cancer walk. I participated in the walk for two years, and then became a medical team captain volunteer the third year. In 2002, right after my fourth walk, I noticed my breast was swollen and red. I went in for an ultrasound, and had to have immediate surgery. They told me that my prognosis was not good.

I refused to consider the option of dying. It never occurred to me. I got my family together and told them we were not going to boo-hoo. We were going to treat it and move on. I knew I was willing to spend all of my energy pushing uphill. I want to live to be 100 and make my kids miserable.

I hated physical therapy. Nurses are the worst patients. So I started belly dancing instead. I eventually got back almost all of the range of motion in my arms and chest, as well as my self-confidence and my lust for life.

My life really changed. A light bulb went on. I recognized that I have a lot to offer everyone in my life. The learning experience from cancer has been far greater than the price.

These belly-dancing classes make me feel feminine again. I'm the oldest one in the group, but they have become my daughters, sisters, mothers, and friends. I never would have thought I could get on stage in front of an audience, but I have gone from "I can't do this," to "I can hardly wait." Dear God, I get up on stage half naked, and now my only fear is that something might fall out. I can't believe that I am 53 and I get to have this much fun.

Speaking of age, I no longer celebrate my actual birthday. My celebration is on the date of my diagnosis; my 're-birthday.' While in Chemo, my daughter and I got matching tattoos: a pink ribbon above our breasts, and koi fish on our backs to signify longevity.



“The learning experience from cancer has been far greater than the price.”



Tiffany Graley | Payroll Accountant, 26 years old
Ewing Sarcoma, 2004

“Not all cancer survivors can be famous, but we’re all survivors and want to help as many others as we can.”

I swam and played water polo my entire life, and then one day a doctor looks at scans of my arm and tells me it is life threatening. A tumor was growing so big and so fast, it was breaking the bone and they needed to operate right away.

I was so angry, I just wanted to strangle everyone in the room. I was 22 and I had plans. I certainly wasn’t prepared to start chemo the next day. I felt so alone.



I didn’t know anyone else my age that had cancer, and I felt so embarrassed by it. Then I discovered “Planet Cancer” online. I found others just like me, and I so much wanted to help them because I understood. I knew that was a way I could heal myself.

Everyone is battling something. I’m not a lone soldier out there. Pity is such a bad place to get lost. Cancer gave me a new lease on life. I don’t take my life for granted now. You never know when it might be gone.

I want to be more sincere and understanding. The self that I came out of cancer with is much better than the self I had when I went in. If all I had to do was lose my hair and a piece of my arm, it’s worth it.

Not all cancer survivors can be famous, but we’re all survivors and want to help as many others as we can.

Chelsea Kauffman | 17 years old
Germ Cell Teratoma, 2005

“To live without goals is to exist without celebrating life.”

Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I was just another giddy, 15-year-old, size-four girl. After six surgeries and six months of chemotherapy, I first had to learn that I needed to allow myself to grieve for all the fear that I experienced, and to grieve the loss of my fifteenth year. My focus then could change to moving forward.

I've been in remission for a year and a half, and I've learned that pessimism is not the way to go through life. It merely kept me numb. It was time for me to start writing my life.

I wasn't given my life back so that others could direct it. I got it back to celebrate it my way. I still have yet to find what that celebration looks like, but this is what I know: I love the ocean, Italian food, my family and friends, and my Jewish community. I know I want to be a doctor, and now I have inspiration. I can fight disease on behalf of others. I know I can plan ahead because my future now exists. I know not to sweat the small things, but focus on the big. I've stopped wearing a wig and I have designed my wedding dress.

To live without goals is to exist without celebrating life.

Alana, Chelsea's twin sister: I have always been the nurturer and she has always been the fighter. If I had had to go through what Chelsea went through, they would have had to duct tape my mouth shut.

Chelsea's friends Hannah, Daniella, Marissa, Kayla, and Sarah:

- I found out in carpool. My dad said Chelsea was not coming back to school – everyone was crying.
- I remember after cutting her hair, crying and crying. This isn't supposed to happen to young people.
- Of course all of this made Chelsea brave, but the weird thing is that it made all of us brave too. One day, we made all the adults leave her hospital room so we could help Chelsea throw up – I never could have done

that before. But this was Chelsea and we just had to do it.

- We were all so young and never thought about anything like this. So we took advantage of it and treasured our friendships. It brought us a lot closer because we realized the importance of our time together. It was a reality check. Emotionally it was scary, but at the same time it was incredible how it made us all so much closer.
- People can fight and get through it. No one deserves it, but Chelsea showed us how to be strong. Chelsea is our hero.





Corey Jackson

Musician, 38 years old
Stage 4 Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, 2005
Recurrence, 2007

“It (cancer) pulled my head right out of my ass.”

When they called and told me the diagnosis, I immediately ran into the shower and tried to wash it away. I got out of the shower and had my last cigarette after a 15-year smoking habit. And that week, I went organic. If I’m going down, I’m not going down without a fight.

Cancer caused an immediate change in my life. It pulled my head right out of my ass. It made me wake up because Stage 4 is not just Stage 4 when you learn there is no Stage 5.

As much pain as it’s given me, I’m a better person for it. How can I not be grateful for that? The more I live with it, the more I get this overwhelming beneficial feeling.

I know it is only healthy to embrace the negatives with the positives. Like it or not, life is a terminal condition. But I learned that it is important to be present while it is happening. Cancer opened me up. Work is no longer my top priority. There are more important things to do than what I was doing. Instead, I am active in fundraising and helping people. That has been very therapeutic for me. I also started karate again. We want to start a family, and I want to live to be 87.

Corey’s wife, Sharon: I definitely see him stopping to smell the roses now. Every day he gets a little tea and goes to sit on the beach. He doesn’t work nearly as hard. Before this, the only breaks he would take were to get up and have a cigarette and make another pot of espresso.

Of course it is difficult to see the person you love the most go through something like this. But I can say that my life right now is a happy life. That might surprise some people. We’re much closer as a couple for having gone through this. We just celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary. He says he wants to live to be 87, but I’m hoping when he gets there, he’ll reconsider that number.





Bill Kavanagh

Writer, Producer, 53 years old
Stage 4 Hodgkins Lymphoma, 2008

“Our biggest challenges always present our most rewarding gifts.”

The oncologist told me on December 24th that I had cancer. I remember saying to him, “Merry Christmas to you too. Sorry I didn’t get you anything.” But then I immediately told him that I have learned several times over in life that our biggest challenges always present our most rewarding gifts, and I would be anxious to find out what the blessings would be. As it turns out, it was the greatest Christmas gift I have ever received.

I have been HIV positive for 24 years. Back then, it was a death sentence. They gave me five years, at the most. So I’ve already been through the “gonna die” routine. But once again my world was slammed into harsh reality and the sudden search for purpose. This time, I knew I would make it.

My cousin’s son is 20 years old and was visiting me recently with his girlfriend. They asked my advice for two young people about to start their lives. I told them not to be afraid to take risks; jumping off the cliff is the only way to learn to fly. Then they told me that they were so excited about the future. They have no idea how profound that was for me. Cancer gave me a new future just as if I were 20 again. They made me realize that age has no bearing on our level of excitement about our future.

I’m only a few months out of chemotherapy, and what is next for me is uncertain. But I know one thing for sure. . . . I’m willing to jump. I want to fly.

Brandon Schott

33 years old
Singer, Song Writer, Producer, Musician
Extragenadal Germ Cell Tumor in Chest, 2007

Cancer really truly was the best thing that ever happened to me. I saw the best of humanity, and what I was left with was an incredible perspective for moving forward.

I am stronger, and I push myself to further limits. I'm empowered, balanced, and I put things in perspective. It's okay now not to balance the checkbook, and I can have dirty laundry. I'll just dust off a dirty shirt and do the laundry the next day.

As difficult as it was, it gave me a renewed vision of the world. It reconnected me to spirituality, to that force that binds us all together. There was a feeling that it wasn't just me that had cancer, but that this whole network of care we'd created had cancer. We were all fighting it together. The amount of love that surrounded me was beautiful and overwhelming. I saw spirituality in action.

I knew the energy wasn't mine to keep. I was just borrowing it for a little while, so I wanted to pay it back and help somebody else. I wrote songs that seemed to pour out of the air. I barely remember writing them. I started "Artists for Healing" which is a musical outreach program for artists to pull together to celebrate and champion causes close to their hearts; to apply music and art to provide a healing presence in our world.

Brandon's wife, Michelle: We have a new faith in each other as well. His cancer gave us a type of rediscovery and renewal. I have a little bit of a crush on him like I did in the beginning.

"It's like he's young again without cancer, only better."



Kevin Carlberg | Musician, 31 years old
Grade 4 Glioblastoma Multiforme, 2003

“No one is going to tell me when my time is up.”

W We had just been voted best college band in America by a Rolling Stone Magazine competition, and were touring in Colorado when I started having terrible headaches. I was also engaged to be married in two months. Then, all of a sudden, they told me I had a brain tumor the size of a fist and I needed brain surgery.

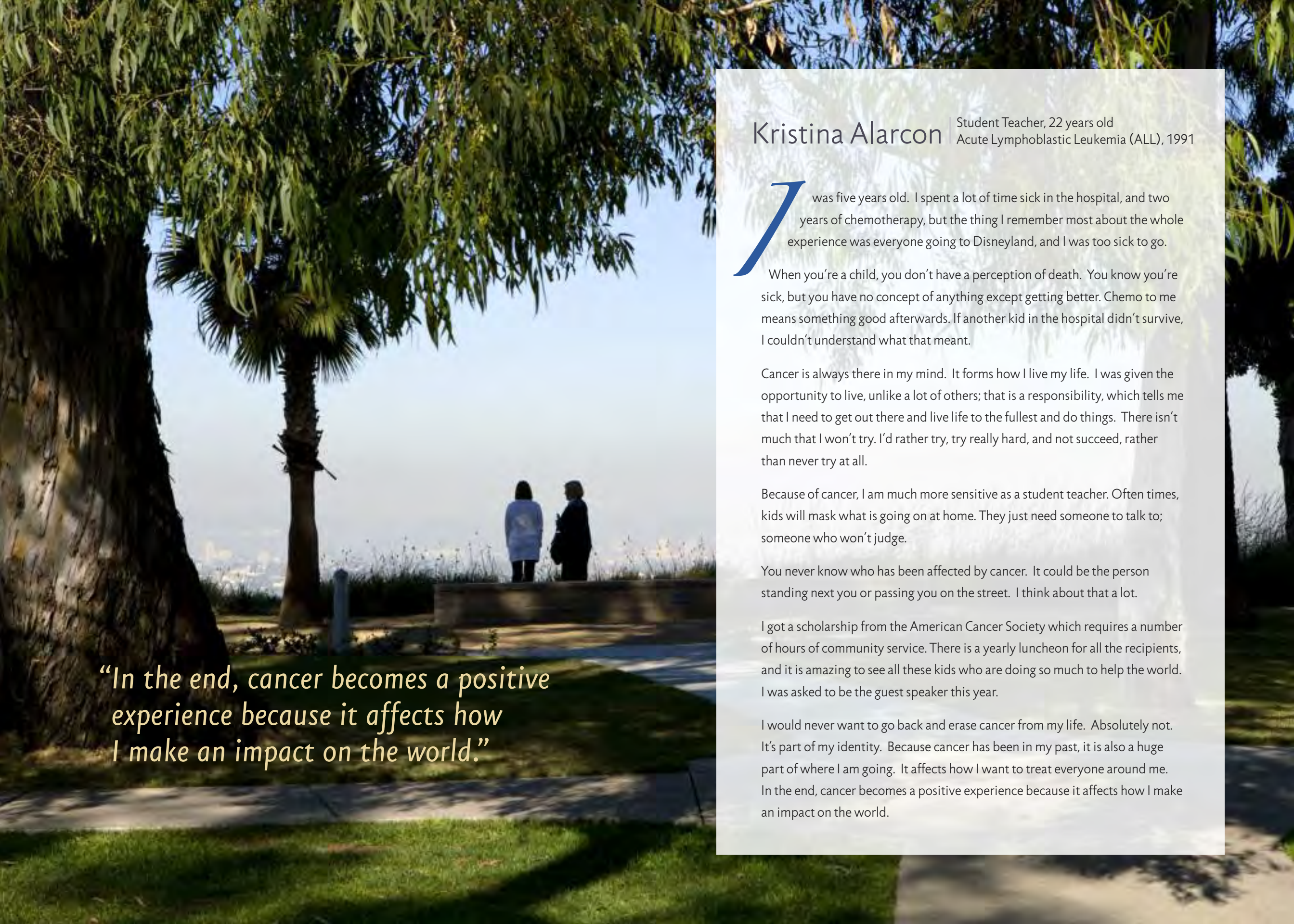
We kept our wedding date, but we downsized it and made it much more intimate. My wife is amazing; she is my rock. I never would have been able to do any of this without her, and it was because of her that I kept fighting. My daughter Lyric is now 3 years old. Every night the three of us read from a little prayer book, and then she says a prayer for “Daddy’s head.”

I have a lot more things to do here. I ran the LA Marathon to raise money for the UCLA Neurosurgery department. I recently I was accepted by an organization called “Love Hope Strength,” to do a concert on top of Mount Kilimanjaro. I’m training for it now.

My wife reminds me that life is just like training for a marathon. One mile at a time, every day. We make it work, and we can only hope that we inspire others. I have a special t-shirt that I wear when I visit hospitals. It says, “Don’t Worry. Be Happy.” I want to show them that there is always hope.

No one is going to tell me when my time is up. I don’t take the little things for granted, and every morning I say, “Thank you. I’m here again.”





“In the end, cancer becomes a positive experience because it affects how I make an impact on the world.”

Kristina Alarcon

Student Teacher, 22 years old
Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), 1991

I was five years old. I spent a lot of time sick in the hospital, and two years of chemotherapy, but the thing I remember most about the whole experience was everyone going to Disneyland, and I was too sick to go.

When you're a child, you don't have a perception of death. You know you're sick, but you have no concept of anything except getting better. Chemo to me means something good afterwards. If another kid in the hospital didn't survive, I couldn't understand what that meant.

Cancer is always there in my mind. It forms how I live my life. I was given the opportunity to live, unlike a lot of others; that is a responsibility, which tells me that I need to get out there and live life to the fullest and do things. There isn't much that I won't try. I'd rather try, try really hard, and not succeed, rather than never try at all.

Because of cancer, I am much more sensitive as a student teacher. Often times, kids will mask what is going on at home. They just need someone to talk to; someone who won't judge.

You never know who has been affected by cancer. It could be the person standing next you or passing you on the street. I think about that a lot.

I got a scholarship from the American Cancer Society which requires a number of hours of community service. There is a yearly luncheon for all the recipients, and it is amazing to see all these kids who are doing so much to help the world. I was asked to be the guest speaker this year.

I would never want to go back and erase cancer from my life. Absolutely not. It's part of my identity. Because cancer has been in my past, it is also a huge part of where I am going. It affects how I want to treat everyone around me. In the end, cancer becomes a positive experience because it affects how I make an impact on the world.