

DOS 771

Service Learning Journal

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Sometimes, as we learn about the physics and computer processes used in the planning of cancer radiotherapy, it is possible to lose sight of the human side of the fight against cancer. Patients are reduced to cross sectional images on screen, and we puzzle out the best strategy to set up geometries and beam strengths that win the game of getting all the dose where we need it without exceeding the thresholds on our checklists. I am coming to the world of cancer care from the computing world, where the puzzles and games have a save point that I can always reload if things don't go according to plan. It is good to periodically remind myself that this is no game, the stakes are high, and the effect of cancer, even when successfully treated, takes a toll on real people and those who love them.

The mission of the St. Baldrick's Foundation is to increase awareness of childhood cancer and to raise money to support research into cancers that primarily affect children.¹ Cancers that primarily affect adults such as breast, prostate, head & neck, and lung cancer have their own well-run disease-specific organizations such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure, and lifestyle-focused organizations like the LiveStrong Foundation that promote healthy lifestyle choices including diet and exercise. Children's cancers are different because they are unrelated to lifestyle choices and they are often not detected until they are advanced. In the 1950s, almost all children diagnosed with cancer died from their disease. Because of research into childhood cancers, the most common childhood cancer, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, now has a 90% cure rate. Unfortunately, there are many other kinds of childhood cancer that are still much tougher to treat, and research must be done to advance the state of medical science.

Childhood cancer has been a special cause for me in the last couple years because a friend and mentor of mine shared his and his wife's grief, hope, anger, exasperation, and agony through his blog while their daughter, Rebecca Meyer, went through several rounds of treatments for brain cancer. Each treatment promised to be a cure, and each successively failed to control the cancer. Rebecca passed away last year on her 6th birthday. A St. Baldrick's Hero Fund has been established in her name.

Each year, the Foundation coordinates events around the country where participants raise money by shaving their heads in solidarity with the children who lose their hair because of chemotherapy. A shaved head is a visible symbol of support that lasts for weeks, and anyone of any gender can do it. It's easy, fun, and provides an instant conversation starter.

This year, the 1st year medical students at Loyola University Chicago's Stritch School of Medicine organized a Brave the Shave event here on campus. At the event, I helped distribute promotional material to participants, donors, family members, attendees, and passersby. I was also one of several photographers. We kicked off the event with our youngest patient shaving the first strip into the event organizer's head, cheered on by his large family. The mood was lighthearted and the children (including the young patient) ran around, leaving the somber specter of cancer forgotten for a while. Another patient took a turn with the razor, this time shaving the head of her younger brother, who had volunteered to show his support for her (Figure 2). Each shaveree was invited to introduce themselves or have an introduction done for them. Several people had special requests like cutting down to a Mohawk for a posed photo before finishing the cut. The School of Medicine atrium where the event was held was open and airy with a glass roof that let the cloudless day's sunlight fill the hall with bright light. Around the atrium were three levels of balconies, where people walking by would stop for several minutes to watch and take pictures before carrying on with their days. Everyone was full of smiles while music played in the background. The campus ministry service provided food and drinks, and a large projector screen with a video game system was set up off to the side where kids could pass the time or adults could donate money for entry into a game challenge.

I usually keep my hair fairly short already, but I've never had the courage to shave it all off completely. With the cheering of the crowd, it was great to be able to go through with it, and for a good cause too. Once I was shaved, I took my own turn as barber and shaved the volunteer who had just shaved me. We were the last two of the day. Once things wound down and we closed up the event, I helped clean up the atrium and put things back into their normal state. We raised just under \$2000 before the event, and several hundred more at the event. My campaign raised \$200, making me the third highest fundraiser.

The event was relatively small, but profoundly impactful for me. In my typical patient encounters during my internship, I only ever interact with the patients themselves, so when I saw a patient who had brought their entire large family, it made me stop to remember all of the other

people in that patient's life who are also touched by the anxiety of whether or not their loved one is going to make a full recovery, or the grief of loss if the worst case should come to pass. In other words, this was a very humanizing event, taking patients back out of being abstract pictures on screens.

References

1. About childhood cancer. St Baldrick's Foundation Website.
<http://www.stbaldricks.org/about-childhood-cancer>. Accessed May 2, 2015.

Related Links

The event webpage

<https://www.stbaldricks.org/events/mypage/11914/2015>

Grayden's St. Baldrick's Foundation fundraising page

<https://www.stbaldricks.org/participants/grayden>

The Rebecca Alison Meyer Fund for Pediatric Cancer Research

<http://www.stbaldricks.org/hero-funds/rebeccameyer/>

Stritch School of Medicine press release.

<http://ssom.luc.edu/newswire/spot/index.cfm?id=391>

Figures



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UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
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STITCH SCHOOL
of MEDICINE

**1st annual
St. Baldrick's
Fundraiser**

**April 24, 2015
3-6 pm
SSOM Atrium**

**Food, music,
and more!**

Event page
<https://www.stbaldricks.org/events/StitchLoyola>

**Register online for your
shavee timeslot**

**Food and drinks
generously provided by
University Ministry**

**St. Baldrick's
FOUNDATION**
Conquer Childhood Cancers

The current M1 class has partnered with the St. Baldrick's organization to raise funds and awareness for pediatric cancer research. With only 4% of all research funds, we hope to contribute to this invaluable field.

There are many ways to participate!

- Shave your head! Show solidarity with pediatric cancer patients
 - You can get a sharp buzzcut too, no need to go full bald if you don't want to
- Have friends and family sponsor you
- Like your hair too much? Sponsor one of your classmates
- Attend the event and listen to patients and their families speak about their experiences
- Register online at <https://www.stbaldricks.org/events/StitchLoyola>
- Email pkramer1@luc.edu with any questions

GROW IT SHAVE IT BEAT IT

Figure 1. A flyer for the event.



Figure 2. A patient shaves her younger brother who volunteered to show his support for her.



Figure 3. Grayden's shaving process.



Figure 4. Grayden taking a turn with the clippers.



Figure 5. Grayden with the organizers and volunteers in front of a banner signed by all of the participants and donors.



Figure 6. Stubble shaved all the way down after the event.

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Figure 7. Stritch School of Medicine press release after the event.