

Waiting For Her Lungs
Personal Story

by
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My mom woke me up by shaking my shoulder. I was sleepy and annoyed that I had been woken up at an ungodly hour for an eight year old. The trip from my room to my parents' bedroom was fuzzy since my eyes were still intent on going back to slumber. My mom placed me on the bed and I became aware that my dad and brother were both present. My brother had a similar tired look on his face. My brain could not fathom why I was awake at midnight on a school night. Sighing, my mom and dad sat next to us. I had no inclination of why his solemn face was creased with heavier worry lines than usual. After a pause, my mom spoke. "Your cousin Nicole has passed away."

I couldn't process this information initially. I felt the tears flow out of me without any feeling behind them. I couldn't move, couldn't react, and couldn't speak. My cousin was gone. The only female cousin close enough to my age that I could call here my friend. It was not until I was taken back to my bed where I felt the full force of death hit me. I spent hours crying that night. It was the first time I experienced true grief in my life, and for an eight year old, it was confusing and scary.

Fast-forward nine years and I sit here writing this essay in remembrance of my cousin Nicole. Since that night I have discovered a plethora of information that led to her death, and a lot of it was hard to face. When I was young, I had a hard time grasping what leukemia was. An invisible blood cancer was eating this relative, scarcely a year older than I was. It didn't make sense when I couldn't play with her when she was in treatment. It didn't make sense when my parents told me about her failed experimental treatments. Leukemia, like it does to the medical providers of the country, eluded my intellectual grasp.

Nicole's leukemia was a genetic mutation. Due to the translocation of the Philadelphia chromosome, my cousin had chronic myelogenous leukemia, an aggressive form of the disease. However, after a bone marrow transplant and rounds of full body radiation, the doctors at UCLA were proud to announce that she was in remission. The future looked bright until Nicole started having trouble breathing. She would have coughing fits constantly and was unable to remove the fluid build-up in her lungs. She was put on supplemental oxygen after doctors became concerned for her life. After several tests, my family was told that the radiation she was exposed to at an early age had stunted her growth. While this was minor problem for most of her body, here lungs had not developed properly and could not supply her growing body with sufficient oxygen. She was placed on an organ donor waiting list for a small pair of lungs-only available from children or small teenagers. After awaiting for some time and watching Nicole deteriorate, the doctors began to consider using adult lungs and cutting them to fit inside her small frame. At the command of the hospital, she was placed on the waiting list for a pair of healthy adult lungs. She died while she was still on that list.

The importance of organ donors is impossible to describe. With thousands of people waiting for a lifesaving organ, my cousin's story is not the only one. If more people had chosen to put a little red hard on their driver's license, she might be alive today. Child donors are needed as well. While it may be hard to consider the life of one child in the absence of another, your child may be giving someone else a second chance at life. For this reason, I personally implore every American to consider organ donation. Eventually someone out there will thank you.