

The diagnosis and treatment of leukemia for my younger sister has been, by far, my most challenging and life changing experience. Four years younger than me, we learned of the disease shortly before she turned nine. Brita's small athletic frame weakened and challenged her spirit. Each day became a mini victory and suddenly previous concerns appeared miniscule against what our family now faced. Our priorities in life quickly shifted as the health of our youngest faltered.

Despite the tremendous battle Brita fought, the cancer eventually won and she passed away the following winter. Devastated, our family began to pick up the pieces broken by her departure from our lives. Brita remains such a stunning example with her optimism and resolve to her last day. She is, by far, the bravest person I have even known, similar to all the kids in her hospital ward.

This experience taught me patience with people and circumstances by demonstrating there are things simply out of your control. Additionally, I've learned to never take anything personally because it is impossible to truly understand where that person is coming from. Their grumpy or melancholy mood is most likely unrelated to you and you have the opportunity to shed some light on their day. This experience has provided me with the tools of supporting others coping with similarly difficult experiences and has furnished me with a foundation of coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges that arise in life. Journaling, yoga, running, and confiding in good friends are an essential part of my mourning/thriving repertoire.

Facing such struggles at the age of fourteen helped to shape the leader role I have grown into today. Recalling Brita's endless hours in a hospital bed, I created "Brita's Blessings," a program that provides new books for the pediatrics ward as well a cart that rolls around, filled with used books. Brita continues to impact my life to this day and is a constant humbling reminder of life's priorities.