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From Patient to Practitioner

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From patient to practitioner



Robert Lisac '12 battled leukemia as a teen and said, "The exposure to so many doctors and seeing each one of them taking such pride in my treatment gave me immense respect for the profession and a desire to be among them."

After a brutal fight with leukemia, Robert Lisac '12 has seen his share of the inside of hospitals. And yet if he has his way, Lisac will spend his career in a hospital – but from a different vantage point.

Lisac graduated with honors with a degree in biology in May and hopes to one day treat children with cancer. This summer he will apply to medical school and plans on volunteering at Doernbecher Children's Hospital, the same hospital where he received his treatment.

At age 12, Lisac was diagnosed with leukemia and spent six years battling the disease and complications from treatments. As his peers started high school in 2004, Lisac received life-saving bone marrow from his older brother,

William. Soon after, complications set in and during an October stretch in the Doernbecher Intensive Care Unit, he was given a 2 percent chance of living.

Amazingly, he rebounded. From his 10th floor window, he could watch the sunrise over the Willamette River and reflect on all he was going through before the chaos started each day.

"There was so much unknown," said Lisac, recalling the concern of his doctors and parents when he relapsed. "That was the most worrisome time. At all other times, there seemed to be a plan of action and I just trusted the doctors and knew I would get through it."

In all, he endured more than 1,100 doctor appointments, 69 blood transfusions and 25 major surgeries, not to mention hundreds of needle pokes, antibiotic doses and chemotherapy sessions.

Though confined to a wheelchair for most of his high school years, he still managed to walk across the stage to deliver his valedictorian speech at Clackamas High School. Appropriately, he urged his fellow classmates to "never give up."

"Cancer makes you grow up fast," he said in his speech, which can be found on YouTube. "There are no guarantees in life, but I learned that it's important to never give up on your dreams."

By the time he set foot on the Linfield campus, Lisac was cancer free and appeared every inch a typical college freshman, biking to class and snowboarding on the weekends. Most of his classmates had no idea of his past health challenges.

But the experience left Lisac with a profound drive to become a doctor. In addition to making the Dean's List, playing in the Linfield pep band and joining the *Linfield Review* photography staff, Lisac immersed himself in science. For the past three years, he's conducted cancer research with Anne Kruchten, assistant professor of biology, who describes Lisac as driven and focused.

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"Robert is skeptical and always looking for evidence, the trait of a really good scientist," said Kruchten, his advisor. "When you combine drive and skepticism, you have the potential to make really important discoveries. He'll be a great physician because he will have the medical knowledge and use it to serve his patients."

Lisac also nabbed summer internships studying colorectal cancer proliferation at Baylor College of Medicine and research with his own oncologist, Dr. Eneida Nemecek, at Doernbecher's Hematology Oncology Clinic.

Lisac said the hardest part of having leukemia was not the illness, but rather the isolation and loss of friends, both for him and his family.

"I wasn't in school anymore and it's just something that happens," he said. "No one knows what to do. They don't understand what's going on. That's why you make such strong connections with other cancer patients and their families. They understand what you're going through."

Ultimately, Lisac believes his struggle will make him a better doctor.

"This experience will allow me to have a lot of empathy with patients and truly understand what they're going through, and what they will likely need in a certain instance," he said. "I've had the patient experience and can understand how they're feeling." 🌿

– Laura Davis