

Navin

Valentine's Day will never be the same. Four years ago, Cupid's holiday coincided with my discovery of a tumor in my cheek. Later diagnosed as a rare sarcoma, this capricious cancer has provoked me to understand myself and my passions. While I have developed new life perspectives since vying with cancer, my metamorphosis was not induced by my illness, but through learning to confront myself. My renewed outlook manifests in my leadership with the American Red Cross where I serve as the youngest ever Chairman of the National Advisory Council on Youth Involvement. Carrying my insight from cancer--that tomorrow is never guaranteed--I have re-focussed the Council's advocacy efforts on behalf of the 340,000 youth volunteers of the Red Cross. Rather than promoting youth as an investment for tomorrow, I have prioritized youth as the asset of today. With a more immediate message, our Council has bolstered corporate youth programs and youth funding. Through my service on the National Committee on Resolutions, I also integrate youth initiatives from the field level of the Red Cross into national policy.

My approach to Red Cross service has also changed at the grassroots level. Shortly after my final chemotherapy treatment, I was dispatched to a residential fire in central Fort Worth. At the scene, I discovered a mother crouched at the curb silhouetted against her smoldering house. While listening to the mother, I learned that she lost her thirteen-year-old son in the blaze. Though I had rehabilitated disaster victims before my illness, this event carried a different significance. While I was learning to live anew, I comforted a mother coping with death. My conversation with the mother compelled me to re-confront my journey with cancer. By reflecting on my own anxieties, still real and familiar, I empathized with the mother on an equal plane rather than that of victim and volunteer. Through service, I now probe my own experiences to assist and empower others.

I have confronted and challenged myself in other realms of my life. Last spring, in [REDACTED] Theater, the lights were dim and the audience hushed as a cool cube of ice melted over my tongue. Through the crack in the curtain, I noticed my friends huddled in the rear of the theater. A moment later the music roared and I leaped on stage with my troupe. Dressed in our radiant costumes, we feverishly danced, skipped, and clicked our sticks in near perfect harmony. For seven triumphal minutes, we enchanted the crowd with our performance on the dandia raas, a North Indian folk dance. The dance was especially meaningful for me; it was my first form of athletic expression since recovering from my sarcoma. Before my illness I savored athletics, climbing to become the fifth-ranked junior tennis player in Texas. But after radiation treatments to my head and the subsequent loss of salivary flow, tennis became too uncomfortable to play. By challenging myself to dance, I have rediscovered my zeal for athletic expression. For seven minutes a cube of ice on my tongue compensates for my loss of saliva and allows me to dazzle audiences. I realize that confronting

myself after cancer has required that I rediscover old passions such as a love for athletics and public service in fresh ways.

In total remission from my illness, today I aspire to return to the world of medicine as a practicing physician. Though I initially hesitated to re-face the medical sphere and its unpleasant memories, the passage of time and my service experiences have steered me toward the field of health. Through the Red Cross, Physicians for Human Rights, and as an editor for the [REDACTED] International Review, I document and address the health and developmental barriers encountered by marginalized communities. This past summer, on assignment with Physicians for Human Rights, I interacted with child laborers in south Indian and examined how Indian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) address the health and psychological burdens of child exploitation. My association with a young rag picker in a Bangalore city slum stands out in my memory. When I asked the child about the lacerations on his feet, he related how his work required him to trample over broken vials and needles while scavenging through hospital waste. When I later invited the child to share his dreams, he shrugged and explained how he only longed to sell enough hospital waste to pay for his sister's marriage dowry. My research, which also forms the backbone of my senior honors thesis, has reinforced my desire to practice medicine in a developmental context. The physician who understands the socio-political roots of poor health, like onerous dowries and improper waste disposal, can more effectively ameliorate human suffering. As a physician, I aspire to direct a health and development NGO that directly enhances the physical and social well-being of marginalized and oppressed communities.

I have further explored my interests in human development through my international activities with the Red Cross. As the organization's youngest humanitarian law instructor, I teach relief workers about civilian protections during warfare and train Red Cross personnel to trace refugees uprooted by conflict. With support from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, I developed an international humanitarian law curriculum for college and high-school students. The program, taught in pilot classrooms across the United States, encourages students to appreciate human rights as both an academic and public service concept. As a student, teacher, and practitioner of development, I aspire to continue bridging my academic and service experiences in pursuit of humanity.

The process of shaping my aspirations and seeking my passions has required that I interpret the everyday experiences that form my life mosaic. As I grow after cancer, I realize that my illness did not stir my zeal for humanity or service, but rather provoked me to understand both the reasons why and the people whom I serve. As long as there are Valentine's Days I will continue to love living; today I simply live for different reasons.