

The Janus Perspective



R. Caleb Buege

I pressed the buzzer on the door and waited for the light to blink green.

I knew the drill, and why shouldn't I? I had spent hundreds of hours on 7 West, the pediatric oncology wing of Kosair Children's Hospital. It was strange being back there. The room felt noticeably smaller than I remembered, and I could feel the eyes of the nurses and see the looks of confounded familiarity on their faces, as though they recognized me but couldn't account for the changes that time had made. I couldn't blame them for not greeting me like an old friend. After all, the last time I'd been here, I was 15 years old, emaciated, bald and in the battle of my life against cancer.

My doctor, however, recognized me right away and offered an enthusiastic half-hug handshake while welcoming me back to the wing where I had spent so much of my adolescence. He had been there from the beginning – through diagnosis, prognosis and treatment. He had a different excitement about him now and joked more than I remembered, as if my being there meant the ultimate mark in a personal win column. I suppose there wasn't much to be excited about on many of my previous visits.

We toured the wing of the hospital for a while, hugging and reacquainting with old friends and pointing out familiar places, recalling the associated memories, sometimes with laughter but often with a sort of somber reflection. Every place took me back, and I was suddenly proud to be where I was, to have overcome such trying obstacles. I wasn't back at 7 West for treatment or checkup. I wasn't back just to see old friends. I was back to see what I had already seen a thousand times. I was back to see a physician at his work, to shadow my doctor as he treated new patients. My present situation and my memories of the past were melding together, reminding me of why I had worked so hard to get there, reminding me of why I wanted to be a doctor.

As we entered the first room, I slid inconspicuously to the back of the group. I was there to observe. Everything about the place reminded me of my time there ... the smells, the brightly colored walls, the beeps of the machines, the nurses checking and rechecking the drip from the bags of fluid. Everything was familiar, but nothing as familiar as the figure lying in that bed. He was about 16, bald and emaciated, tubes and wires protruding from his bare chest. As my doctor informed him of test results and tests to come, I watched his eyes

roam about the room, studying this group of strangers. He was obviously annoyed by this horde of onlookers and slightly embarrassed to be in his underwear, but once you've been in a hospital as long as he had, trivial matters like modesty become less and less important. I began to think about how I had learned what was really important from my time in his place. I remembered the cards, prayers and support that I received from friends and family. I remembered how my mother never left my side. To the right of the bed I noticed the very armchair where she slept, six nights a week, for a year. I could see her sitting there, holding a vomit pail and telling me to drink more water, or remarking about how my color had changed. I thought about the late nights with her in that hospital. We would trade pails as I filled them and she emptied them, hardly sleeping, always sick, always exhausted, but always fighting. I remembered every morning my doctor asking me how the night had gone. He never needed to ask. He knew the chemo was destroying me. He really only asked so the words could be heard: to let me know that he knew, that he cared and that he understood that my answers weren't short because I was annoyed, but because I had just spent my fifth sleepless night vomiting and wishing that I was anywhere but in that bed. That same understanding was evident in his relationship with this young patient. I watched him, my doctor, and I wanted to be in his shoes. I wanted to tell that kid that I understood, that it wasn't easy. I wanted to help him, to talk to him. I wanted to be his doctor.

We left the room with salutations and nods to the patient and the understanding that we would all be back tomorrow to repeat the conversation. The rest of the day played out in similar fashion. Familiar situations brought back memories and trials, but every situation served as further confirmation that I was moving in the right direction.

That day was not the first time that I realized I wanted to be a doctor, but it was a reminder of why I had worked so hard to reach that goal. My experiences battling osteosarcoma had taught me so much about life and had given me a perspective that helped get me through other trials. Late nights in the library were nothing compared to late nights in that hospital bed. Anxiety over exams was nothing compared to waiting for test results from the lab. Graduating with honors wasn't quite as satisfying as that final round of chemotherapy. I have experienced moments of elation and fear, hope and disappointment, but every experience has helped forge the character and determination that make me who I am. I have seen how good friends can make us brave. I have seen how loved ones can help us overcome any obstacle, and I have seen how a good doctor can help us find our true calling. To all I am indebted, and to all I say, thank you. **LM**

Note: R. Caleb Buege is a University of Louisville medical student.

Here, he receives his award from Dr. Barry.

