

What does it mean to you to be a cancer survivor?

To me, being a cancer survivor means more than having once been a cancer patient. It means having encountered fear, uncertainty, physical suffering, and the strange experience of becoming a “case” or a statistic, while still continuing forward. Cancer forced me to understand life, death, vulnerability, and dependence in ways I never expected to confront as a young adult.

But survivorship is not only defined by hardship. For me, being a survivor also means being part of a community of people who carry a unique kind of knowledge. It has given me a deeper capacity to relate to others who are suffering, to recognize the humanity of patients beyond their diagnoses, and to imagine care differently. Survivorship has become a source of responsibility, empathy, and growth.

How has your identity been affected?

I was diagnosed and treated during my freshman year of college, at a time when I thought I was supposed to be building my future, my friendships, and my sense of self. Instead, my life was flipped on its head. Many of the things I had built my identity around — academics, volleyball, friendships, achievement, and being seen a certain way by others — suddenly became unstable or inaccessible.

Cancer forced me to ask who I was when those things were stripped away. It made me reflect more honestly on my values, my relationships, and the kind of person I wanted to become. Being confronted with mortality changed the way I perceive success, acceptance, and comparison. I no longer want to live primarily for approval, ego, or social expectation. I want to live in a way that feels genuine, meaningful, and aligned with who I am.

That clarity did not come easily. It came through loneliness, fear, and the difficult process of accepting both my vulnerability and my limits. For a long time, I identified more as a cancer patient than as a person living beyond cancer. Eventually, I realized I did not want cancer to become a crutch or a permanent limit on who I could be. I am not only a patient. I am a survivor. Now, my cancer experience serves less as something that confines me and more as something that continues to push me toward growth, connection, and purpose.

What would you like people to know that they may not have considered?

I wish people understood that cancer does not end the moment treatment ends. Survivors may look “better” or return to ordinary life, but the experience continues to shape us medically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Many survivors carry late effects, health risks, trauma, fear of recurrence, and memories that are not visible to others.

At the same time, we are still people beyond our cancer. Personally, I do not want to be pitied or reduced to my diagnosis. I want my experience to be respected and my perspective to be valued, but I also want to be treated as a whole person — someone with ambitions, humor, relationships, flaws, joy, and a future.

I also want people to know how much support matters. A simple message, a moment of presence, or a small act of care can offer enormous relief to someone going through cancer. You may not always know what to say, and that is okay. What often matters most is showing someone that they are not alone.