

I was homeschooled during my elementary and secondary education. At age 15, I began taking courses at the local community college. With those credits, plus credits received through AP courses done at home, I was able to complete the Associates Degree in the University Transfer Program from Blue Ridge Community College at the same time I graduated from homeschool high school. I then transferred into JMU as a Junior.

I had only planned being at JMU for two years. However, during the spring semester of my junior year, I began to experience health problems that eventually sent me to the hospital for three extended stays during the summer/fall of 2006. I had surgeries to remove fluid from my lungs and to replace a vertebra that had been destroyed by a tumor. Eventually I was diagnosed with anaplastic large cell lymphoma and had to sit out a semester for chemotherapy treatments.

Although for some students the prospect of taking no classes for a semester is appealing, I found the lack of academic stimulation to be agonizingly boring. In the spring of 2006, I was able to take one class while finishing chemotherapy and then receiving radiation therapy. In March I finished radiation and was pronounced cancer-free. This semester I am returning as a full-time student to finish my Computer Science major and minors in Mathematics and Technical & Scientific Communication.

Regarding future goals and plans, I am currently interested in pursuing research as a career. Often during everyday activities, I find myself questioning the things I read and learn, asking questions about lesser-known topics and wondering about concepts that few others seem to care about. Being homeschooled taught me the skills necessary to dig into a subject on my own. I have always been highly motivated to learn new concepts independently and have gained greater appreciation for having learned them because of the work involved. Because of this motivation to attain higher learning, I decided last semester to apply for a summer undergraduate research program.

I thought it would be interesting to try to combine my computer science skills with my personal experiences in medical imaging, so I applied for the Medical Informatics (MedIX) Research Experiences for Undergraduate (REU) Students program at DePaul University in Chicago. I was selected to be one of nine students involved in medical imaging research in a joint program with Northwestern Memorial Hospital. We spent ten weeks working on various projects involving image processing and medical informatics. I found it to be a very stimulating and challenging experience, and it solidified my interest in research. I currently plan to apply for a graduate program in computer science when I graduate from JMU.

I have always been a firm believer in excellence, no matter what my occupation or hobby. I graduated from community college with a 4.0 GPA and have so far maintained a 4.0 GPA at JMU, even during the semester that I was having health problems. I also enjoy integrating the various parts of my life, such as how my internship combined computer programming and my medical experiences. When I served as leader of the youth praise band at my church for two years, I used my computer programming skills to implement a computer-based music organization system that enabled easier planning of music lists. In addition to playing my guitar with my church youth praise band, I also played guitar and led a group of homeschool kids in a singing ministry at two nursing homes during my 9th and 10th grade years of high school.

I believe it is important for cancer patients to not fall into the trap of feeling incapable of performing at the same level as "normal" people. The helplessness that I felt while lying in a hospital bed or tethered to a IV line were at times overwhelming, but hope will prevail in the end. With the help of modern medicine and the support of loved ones, faith and determination can and do enable cancer patients to not only survive, but to achieve their dreams. Of this I am living proof.