

### **The Elephant in the Circus**

When I think about the way cancer is viewed in society, I think of Lauryn Murray's work with performing elephants. When addressing other's concerns about animals in entertainment, she makes three important points: 1) Animal entertainment helps society feel connected and curious about the animals that are performing. 2) The performance inspires society to care about the animals and take steps to preserve them. 3) Each elephant has its own specific experiences and needs that should be considered in addition to its performance (Murray, 2025).

In the world of oncology, cancer patients are the elephants and their stories are the performance. Society needs patient stories so that it will have a pathway to care and connect with the disease. Without those stories, cancer faces the threat of becoming diluted in the ever-growing number of health crises that America faces. The cancer research that has ensued as a result of shared patient and family stories has led to medical advancements that have saved countless lives. For example over the last 50 years the five-year survival rate for leukemia patients alone in the United States has risen from 14% to about 66% (Naheed, 2025). As a leukemia survivor myself I will forever be grateful for the patients who came before me because they are the reason I still get to be here today.

### **The Elephant in the Room**

When I was going through treatment at the age of 14 everyone wanted a version of my story that fit their narrative. For my parents I was "strong" so I cried behind closed doors. For my doctors I was "sweet" so I never spoke up, For society I was "sick" so I hid who I was. To them I was seen as my diagnosis and treated accordingly. It was all a performance. To me this performance felt necessary because it united society and inspired it to care enough to take action for preserving not only me, but the future generations affected by the disease.

The price of this performance however, is when cancer patients are conditioned to conform to a united narrative they risk their own individuality being lost. I was 14 years old when I was diagnosed with cancer, which is the age where kids really get to start creating their own identities. Any form of identity I had created for myself during my first year of High School was immediately crushed under the label of "cancer child" the moment I was diagnosed. I nearly died during treatment, and to this day it makes me sad to think that, for many people, that is all I would have been known as. I wish someone during that time would have asked me how the cancer stories society painted were affecting a life that already did not feel like my own; I was only 14 but I would have had an answer. Over the last 10 years living in remission I have found that few have ever cared enough to be curious about my perspectives from that time. It feels like my experience with cancer is now an elephant that sits in the room- rarely acknowledged by others.

As individuals ourselves we need to self-reflect on our own motives and take time to connect with the people we are trying to help by seeing who they are as a person instead of the label society makes for them. The stories we see in society are oftentimes the ones that have been normalized enough to tell. Having conversations with each other about our elephants is how we shift the dial of normalcy to encompass and support individual perspectives that are impacted by the broader stories being told- or in many cases, not told.

## **The Elephant at the Table**

I have found myself wondering over the years what the difference is between the performing elephant (how society views my cancer experience) and the elephant in the room (how I view my own experience with cancer). I have come to understand that the big difference between the two is that the performance was never mine to begin with, it was society's. In contrast, how I feel about my experiences during that time and the perspectives I gained from it are my own. I suspect that society is more hesitant to address the elephant in the room because it is not a performer, it is authentic. This authenticity comes with the potential of hard truths, discomfort, and introspection. Those are hard things to face, but equally important because within that authenticity there is this beautiful space for connection, healing, and strength.

## **References**

Naheed, A. (2025, July 31). *LLS / History of leukemia*. <https://www.lls.org/blog/history-leukemia#improved-leukemia-prognosis-treatment>

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