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WORLD CANCER DAY

CONNECTING VOLUNTEERISM TO A CAREER:

My Journey With the American Cancer Society and Pharmacy

Christine Kane, College of Pharmacy

ABSTRACT

Christine Kane is a 2016 graduate from the Purdue College of Pharmacy. In this article, she describes how two passions, the profession of pharmacy and volunteerism with the American Cancer Society, became intertwined to change the course of her career. She implores fellow students to never underestimate the impact an extracurricular activity can have on the rest of your life.

INTRODUCTION

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” I remember when these famous words were posed to my class by my third grade teacher in 2001. Many in the class said they wanted to be policemen, teachers, or firefighters. When it was my turn to share, I stood up and proudly announced, “One day, I am going to cure cancer.” As graduation from the College of Pharmacy quickly approached, I realized I never strayed far from my goals. I am beginning my postgraduate training journey to become a board-certified oncology pharmacist.

If you ask me to describe the last six years of my college career, I won’t recount the hundreds of hours I spent attending class and taking endless tests. Rather, a smile will creep onto my face as I try to decide where to begin. I’ll start by telling you about one organization that changed my outlook on life and guided me in finding my chosen path. Never would I have imagined that an invitation to participate in a volunteer activity six years ago would have been so instrumental in defining my career. Hope suddenly had a brand new meaning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. My favorite part of Relay For Life of Purdue University, the HOPE letters.

DESCRIPTION

In my freshman year, I decided to participate in an event called Relay For Life, hosted by the American Cancer Society. Little did I know that this would begin my journey of thousands of hours of volunteering, traveling across the nation to become a part of the future of cancer care; and I never imagined that I would find my inextinguishable passion for the field of oncology. My experiences on Purdue’s campus with Colleges Against Cancer (CAC) taught me the importance of connecting your passions with your career goals. If I could give anyone advice when starting their college career, it would be to find a passion and let it envelope their work, service, and friends.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) is a nationwide, community-based, volunteer health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem through prevention, saving lives, and reducing pain. These efforts are accomplished through cancer research, education, advocacy, and service (American Cancer Society, 2008). It is estimated that 1.6 million new cancer cases will be diagnosed, and 600,000 individuals will die from their cancer this year (American Cancer Society, n.d.). These numbers are heartbreaking. After watching an uncle succumb to cancer, the opportunity to participate in Relay For Life on Purdue's campus, hosted by CAC, simply made sense. For the first time, I felt like I was doing something worthwhile to fight this disease that had taken a toll on my family.

EVALUATION

I had expected to pull all-nighters to cram when I came to college, but I never expected to pull an all-nighter to raise money for the American Cancer Society, or that this single volunteer opportunity would play a role in chasing my biggest, wildest dream. After my first Relay experience, I couldn't get enough of the organization. I went from serving as a captain for Purdue Pre-Pharmacy Club (raising \$3,000 as a team to see the president of Pre-Pharmacy Club walk around in a luau skirt) to serving on the executive board as the sponsorship and fundraising chair. I was the shy girl who hated talking in front of large crowds, let alone strangers, and I suddenly found that this was a required skill in my full-time position with the organization. With this push, I began to develop into a leader within the organization.

Not only does the American Cancer Society fundraise for research and to provide care for survivors, they also invest in the development of volunteer leaders. Their philosophy is to invest in you as much as you invest in them. That devotion to developing leaders is unique, something not often seen in other community organizations. From learning to prioritize responsibilities, speak in front of large crowds, mediate conflict, and lead meetings, I developed skills critical to the real world. During my first few years with CAC and ACS, I refined those skills. By my last year on campus, I traveled to local universities like Ball State and DePauw to teach those skills to others. Fellow Relay participants were excited to hear how I managed my team of executive members and how I approached organizing multiple responsibilities.

During my second year of pharmacy school (my fourth year on campus), CAC went through some structural changes to meet the growing demands of the chapter.

I helped develop a position merging communication between the executive board and club members (later to be titled Club Advocate) on Purdue's campus, while serving as Leadership Development Chair for the State of Indiana on the Campus Advisory Team of Lakeshore Division.

As if I wasn't busy enough with those responsibilities on top of my rigorous curriculum, I signed up to drive for Road to Recovery. This is a program that provides free transportation to and from cancer treatments. My most memorable drive was with an elderly woman who did not have a car or family members to transport her to treatments. When I arrived to pick her up and told her who I was, she remarked that I must have the wrong house, because there was no way someone my age would use their afternoon to help a woman get to her treatment when I could be doing something fun. I told her about my passion for patient care in the oncology world, and she lit up. When I dropped her off at home that evening, she told me that the world needs more individuals like me, because we will change the face of health care.

My last year on campus, when classes were most intense, I sought a higher leadership position to continue developing my time management and leadership skills. A few months later, I was offered the opportunity to serve as Vice President of Team Development, that is, the face leading all teams at Relay For Life. However, as any leader knows, the best teams are created when everyone works together. While I maintained the responsibilities associated with my position, I also hosted a smoking cessation event on campus to meet my internship's community outreach project requirements. Purdue College of Pharmacy CVS interns paired with CAC students to ask students on campus to pledge to stop smoking, or never start. Both the CAC chapter and district supervisor for the Lafayette, Indiana CVS helped me make my advocacy ideas come to life (see Figure 2).

REFLECTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last five years, I felt instrumental in helping CAC grow from a relatively unknown organization to one making a large impact on the West Lafayette community. While I could go on about what I believe I contributed to CAC and Relay For Life at Purdue, the important point is how this organization changed me and how I could not be more thankful for the experiences and investment in my future.

The American Cancer Society has focused the past few years on a transition to the use of social media. They want to get the word out about how cancer affects all of

Figure 2. CVS community outreach intern project hosted by Colleges Against Cancer and Purdue College of Pharmacy CVS interns.

us, and what we can do to fight back. Their One Degree Campaign reminds me of one of the first lessons they teach you in pharmacy school: treat the patient, not the disease. For instance, when a patient is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, have the mindset that you are treating the patient, not the cancer. Look at the patient holistically, and consider all the aspects of their life when defining optimal treatments. This parallels the approach the American Cancer Society uses. In addition to treatment, the family must be cared for mentally and physically—treatment becomes a lifelong journey.

The Relay For Life experience has helped me to see that cancer is not a disease in which college students are immune. The first year I served as a team captain, we were tasked with recruiting survivors. I was surprised to find out that one of the individuals in our college organization was a survivor of childhood cancer. Through my interactions with him at the Relay For Life event and in CAC, I encouraged him to begin speaking about his experiences and how they led him to pursue a career in pediatric oncology. I also met many amazing people that are or were battling the disease, while trying to maintain a normal student life. Each of those individuals reminded me how short life is, and when you are passionate about something, it is important to share that passion with those around you. Our College of Pharmacy has significantly increased its support for Relay For Life of Purdue

University over the last few years, including hosting a booth with blood pressure and blood sugar checks in honor of survivors within the Purdue pharmacy family.

Reflecting back on my experiences with CAC, I wish I had become involved earlier. It wasn't until I was on the executive board that I really understood the impact of what this organization does. When I first applied for colleges, I would have told you that my goal was to get a degree and a job, not to ignite a passion or become a leader. I learned that the college experience doesn't have to define you by your degree or job. Rather, you should use your time and experiences in college to shape you as a person and help define the impact you can make in your community. My experiences with Relay For Life and Colleges Against Cancer will ensure that, as a pharmacist, I will make an impact on every patient I encounter. This is how service intertwined with my curriculum. I have experienced what cancer really is.

In summary, never underestimate the power of an extracurricular activity on the rest of your life. When considering service activities, look for those related to your future career, and turn your passion into your career. The countless hours you contribute won't seem like a job or a responsibility, and they will be recognized as impactful by others. Leadership experiences result in personal growth. Help those around you grow, and develop skill sets that you can't learn in a classroom.

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