**STRONGER THAN EVER: A NARRATIVE AND PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT OF YOUNG ADULT CANCER SURVIVORS IN THE COLUMBUS, OHIO COMMUNITY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Stronger Than Ever is a narrative and photographic research project combining stories, inspirational quotes, and photographic portraits of young adult cancer survivors in the Columbus Community. Young adults, a largely underrepresented group in the battle with cancer, account for 72,000 new cancer diagnoses each year (Stupid Cancer, 2013). The goal of this research project is to raise awareness within my own generation that cancer can strike at any age and that the likelihood of beating the disease is becoming more frequent as understanding of patients’ needs, effective medical treatment and research funding increase. Through open-ended, conversational interviews, the perspectives and narrative experiences (stories) of young adults who have survived cancer are elicited, analyzed, and shared with a variety of audiences. The hope is that those who read the narratives, see the portraits, and listen to the testimonies in venues like YouTube, the Lantern, and other related social and academic forums, might become better informed about cancer as a disease and more sympathetic in their support for the cause.

**METHODOLOGY**

I arranged photo-shoots and face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews, asking volunteers to share experiences about their battle with cancer and how they have become empowered from the journey. Both men and women from a variety of cultural backgrounds offer candid and richly storied perspectives about their experiences. Their words are revealing and the portraits offer even more.

Some sample interview questions include:
1. How has cancer changed your way of life since being diagnosed?
2. Have people treated you differently because of your diagnosis?
3. What is something people can do—say, act, help—that can improve your situation?
4. Is it better for others to ignore the “elephant in the room” by not bringing it up, or to talk about it?
5. Do you feel your outlook on life has changed?

**DISCUSSION**

- Having a support group (friends/family) was crucial to keeping a positive mindset, wish there was a formal support group during treatment
- Many cancer survivors found new hobbies and interests
- Most of the survivors were involved in athletics and thought their cancer was just a sports related injury or growing pains
- Having good relationships and communication with doctors and nurses made their journey easier

**CONCLUSIONS & SIGNIFICANCE**

- In difficult times during cancer diagnosis and treatment, family and close friends often do not know how to interact with and support the cancer patient
- This project benefits friends and family of newly diagnosed patients, so that they might become more fully and sensitively supportive without the fear of saying or doing something wrong
- The stories and photographs of young adult cancer survivors can speak volumes, giving hope, and spreading awareness of the story of cancer
- These stories have been widely shared online through a Facebook page, Tumblr blog, and Twitter account which will allow viewers to directly engage in conversations to bring about cancer awareness

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