

Runner in Red Essay Competition
Gianna Bender – First Place

As I sit across the desk from the interviewer, a new question is posed to me: “Pediatric oncology is a stressful career – as a nurse, you will need a break. What is your escape?” Without hesitation, the answer to her question arrives within my mind. The meaning of running to me has never been static. Just as the movement of the body demands, its importance in my life continues to evolve.

When I first entered high school, I chose to join the track team due to the confidence running had brought to my life. A quiet girl, I often felt shy interacting with others, struggling to make friends as I grew up. I took pride, however, as the fastest individual on my youth sports teams, excited as others depended on me for my stamina and speed. Over time, the quickness with which I could move my legs gave me the confidence to branch out, make friends, and become a leader in my community. It was no question when I entered high school that I would join the track team. I wanted to win, get faster, and take part in an activity I now enjoyed.

I quickly began to learn in high school, however, that the top of the podium is not what matters in life. Running gained a new meaning in my heart in April of 2014. It was then that my childhood friend, Henry, was diagnosed with a form of pediatric cancer, osteosarcoma. I immediately became consumed with supporting my friend and his family at every possible moment. The glimmer of gold medals suddenly seemed insignificant: it was the time with my friend that mattered to me. Though I remained committed to my goals, the steps of my feet began to hold a new significance. When I ran, I found myself escaping from the stress I felt around. Suddenly, I ran because it brought joy to my life. I found gratitude in the ability to push my body to its limits, as my friend with bone cancer no longer could. I still strived to win; however, the process of working to win was what was now enjoyable.

As a college student, running still holds a similar purpose in my life as it once did. I continue to gain confidence as a result of my speed, and I have found my best friends as a part of this team. I desire to win and break my own records more than before. However, the act of running as a form of joy now holds even greater significance. As a result of my friend Henry, I now pursue a career in pediatric oncology nursing. Every Tuesday morning, I wake up at 5 A.M and complete an eight-hour shift. These moments, however, come at an emotional toll. I have

witnessed the births of three children, but I also have experienced the death of an eleven-year-old girl. I have cheered a sixty-four year old patient on as he took his first steps after an amputation, and I have comforted a crying boy who knows his genetic disorder will not let him live past thirty-five. It is only by lacing up my sneakers for practice at the end of the day that I cope with such situations. Running is my joy in stress, my time to put the things I experience into perspective. Adrenaline rushing, heart pounding, I escape from the world around, resorting to the movements that once brought me solace as a young girl.

Following his three-year battle with osteosarcoma, Henry passed away in June of 2017. After days of assisting his family in preparing for the services, I woke up on the morning of his funeral and simply desired to do one thing: run. This memory came to my mind, as I answered the interviewer. "My escape is running," I said. "Nothing makes me feel as free as it does, and it has evolved to become my release from the work of nursing." As I continue my journey after Boston College, I will forever be grateful for the friends I have made and goals I accomplished. Running, however, will still serve as a major aspect of my life, its definition evolving evermore.