

Campo alumna raises childhood cancer awareness as St. Baldrick's ambassador



Brooke Vittimberga



Brooke and her brother, Jack Photos courtesy Brooke Vittimberga

By Vera Kochan

Brooke Vittimberga, 23, from Moraga, was chosen by the St. Baldrick's Foundation as one of its five 2019 Ambassadors, picked to represent kids diagnosed with cancer. The main qualification for being an ambassador is having survived childhood cancer yourself.

St. Baldrick's was founded in 1999 by three financially successful individuals who wanted to give back to society. They decided to raise funds by shaving their heads and donating the proceeds toward childhood cancer research. The foundation's name (a play on words) was chosen to honor individuals who selflessly shaved their heads in solidarity with the children going through cancer treatment and its effects on hair loss. St. Baldrick's has grown to be the largest private fund giver of childhood cancer research grants.

According to the St. Baldrick's website, "More children are lost to cancer in the U.S. than any other disease - in fact, more than any other childhood diseases combined. Before they turn 20, about 1 in 285 children in the U.S. will have cancer. Worldwide, a child is diagnosed every two minutes." Additionally, "In the 1950's, almost all kids diagnosed with cancer died. Because of research, today about 90 percent of kids with the most common type of cancer (acute lymphoblastic leukemia) will live. But for many other types, progress has been limited, and for some kids there is still little hope for a cure."

Vittimberga was diagnosed with PH+acute myeloid leukemia in 2015, at the age of 19. Following chemotherapy, and thanks to a bone marrow transplant from her then 16-year-old brother, Jack, Vittimberga's cancer is in remission, but it came with a price. She is immune-compromised, infertile and has permanent hair loss as a result of the cancer treatment.

Now a premed student at Stanford University, Vittimberga is still on many daily medications and does two full days of treatment every month. "I have struggled immensely since my transplant and have had to take two medical leaves of absence from school," she said. "This is all to treat Graft vs. Host Disease, a side effect of my transplant that has caused severe problems in almost every organ of my body, including my gut, mouth, skin, eyes and liver. I also went into kidney failure in December 2017 - we never really figured out why, but it was likely related to GVHD."

The cancer diagnosis and GVHD was, and still is, very difficult for her parents. "They feel helpless, because they can't fix it for me," Vittim-

berga said, "but they do what they can. Mom helps with my meds." In addition to her brother Jack, now 20, she has an older sister, Casey, 25, and younger sister Ava, who is a junior in high school.

Even before her life-changing cancer diagnosis, Vittimberga had an interest in medicine. "I actually did research at Stanford the summer before 12th grade through a program called SIMR." She also spent a summer doing research at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. "I do research in pediatric oncology here at Stanford and I'm currently working on my honors thesis," she said.

Vittimberga said she's not sure what she plans to specialize in yet. "I was accepted to medical school at Mount Sinai's Icahn School of Medicine through their early acceptance program called Flexmed in 2017, so fortunately I don't have to worry about that. I want to take time to explore every aspect of medicine from the doctor side. I have initial interests in hospice and palliative care, as comfort and dignity are so important throughout illness." She added, "I could also see myself working in an ICU or specializing in a subfield such as cardiology or pulmonology or, of course, oncology. Regardless of the specialty, right now I think I will probably do pediatrics."

While she still experiences pain on a daily basis, Vittimberga says that she's coping with it. She has noticed progress for the better from her struggles with GVHD and wants potential bone marrow donors to know that the experience for the donor is not as horrific as it's made out to be on TV or in the movies. Her brother had no ill effects and was excited to be a part of her "new birthday" celebration - Sept. 24, 2015, the day of her bone marrow transplant procedure.

Vittimberga was chosen to be a St. Baldrick's Foundation 2019 Ambassador because of her outreach work in the childhood cancer community. She started a blog after her 2015 cancer diagnosis (AM-Letc.com) and later wrote a blog post for St. Baldrick's: www.stbaldricks.org/blog/post/a-survivor-speaks-dont-find-my-silver-linings-for-me. She's also written for other publications including Stanford Magazine and Stanford Med School's SCOPE blog <https://amletc.com/published-works/> and her favorite: <https://medium.com/stanford-magazine/i-didnt-beat-cancer-my-doctors-did-ec6c3a92d426>.

As an ambassador, she even finds the time to appear at speaking engagements. "St. Baldrick's is very accommodating and always works with my health and schedule." She modestly says, "I just put one

foot in front of the other and make it work."

As if all of this wasn't enough, Vittimberga has raised over \$13,000 dedicated toward young adult survivorship issues. "It is very impor-

tant to me that we are not just cured, but also have a good quality of life afterward." Her goal was to start a Hero Fund. In order to qualify, Vittimberga had to raise \$10,000. Now that she has surpassed that goal, she is in the process of setting up the fund.

When she does find any spare moments she likes to simply hang out with her friends. Vittimberga admits that it was difficult to see her college peers graduate before her, but has resigned herself to complete her goals in life - one day at a time.

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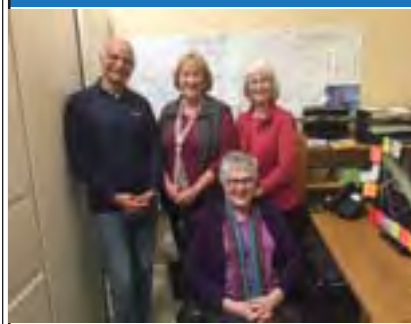


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