

“Lean on me, when you’re not strong, and I’ll be your friend. I’ll help you carry on,” these were the lyrics she had always loved to sing from the man she worshipped: Michael Bolton. And those were the exact lyrics that ran through my head as I sat on the other side of the pale green hospital door. All I could think about was how those words described her exact persona, the person she always was. Michael was her serenade, what kept her going through all of those haunting days. I couldn’t bear to see my cousin Carrie, lying there, victimized on that cardboard hospital bed curled up under those white, lifeless sheets. Carrie always believed that because of his music, she could live life thoroughly, and quest out in hopes to find what she believed was its meaning. She always found a way to see the good in every situation, and I hoped that was exactly what she was doing. I know fear was running through her body, not knowing when her time would come to an end, and I was shaking in my bones. Trying my best to calm my nerves, I began to reminisce on our relationship that had been built through her ability to seek forgiveness even when it was not deserved. Whenever I needed it, she was always there to give a helping hand, and that was what I wanted to do for her while by her side that evening. I wanted to be able to act as she did, to fully comprehend why things happened, and be able to make her feel better. I wanted to so badly, but quickly found myself numb.

I could never understand the endeavors that I’d have to withstand to reach the qualities my cousin possessed. She became my inspiration, the person I had always longed to be and I idealized her strength and optimism. Growing up her

whole life diagnosed with leukemia and being blind, she never really got to see this egotistical world. Being a slave in this cramped up room, I could not understand how my cousin continued to have such an optimistic mindset. She believed in love, and made everyone feel that they were not meaningless. How could she be so positive hooked up to machines, constantly hearing the monotone beeping of the heart monitor? She did not deserve the pain she went through, and the stress that it brought on her parents was really starting to show. They quickly grew impatient, yelling at doctors, questioning God and becoming lost in depression.

Since no one felt that she deserved to be a victim to such a vigorous disease, or just another named wristband in that hospital, there was always such hostility that lurked in the depths of our family. It enhanced so much grief and stress. Carrie's parents started to show their progressing anger. They couldn't bear to feel as if they were abandoning her, allowing her to slowly flee away. Watching their quickening anger, I felt so low in this surreal story. Even though I was only thirteen, I was fully aware of the situation and underwent a mix of emotions. How could I possibly help my Aunt and Uncle? Why, with my cousin being so giving, could I possibly sit here, engrossed in anger, when all she needed was a positive, luminous light? I felt helpless staring through the hollow window at my almost lifeless best friend. Being there was worse than running away from my emotions.

The smell of the emotionless hallway I sat in started to give me a pounding headache. In hopes to surpass my time, I threw on my untied black vans and escaped outside, where I could finally breathe in some fresh air. As I was hit square

in the face with the blaze of the sun, I began to question the ruling of God. I was looking up in hopes of an answer, and wondered why it had to be my family to undergo such pain? I wished in every single way that I could help them, but was unaware of exactly how to do just that. All I was at that moment outside was a petty fly on the wall. The joy that Carrie brought to us glowed like a firefly, but this damp Minnesota air was quickly putting out her light. I wondered how I could help to re-spark it, but thought that only their other daughter could bring it back to life.

Carrie's sister Lauren was always absent in a state of emergency, so I became Carrie's best friend. Becoming the sister figure that Carrie always longed for allowed me to make it easier for my Aunt and Uncle, and helped get my mind off of being the target of bullies at school. I was picked on for my chubby body, but I found comfort in seclusion. No one felt the desire to get to know me as a person. So, Carrie became the only one I could share my life with. Growing up together we became inseparable, submerged in happiness when side-by-side. But being here was different. I had wished that we could just bring her home, forget about her disease, and go back to the epic jam sessions we had to Michael Bolton's music. Her quick ability to recite his music on the piano was always so soothing, and shouting out the lyrics to Soul Provider always made me thankful for having my cousin in my life. She reminded me of a Mozart junior. I couldn't bear to lose her. Right then and there, on the curbside of that busy hospital, I prayed to God. I asked him to please let me have her, as she was the joy of our family, and begged him to take away her sickness.

As I continued to surpass my time on the outside of those empty walls, a flashback came to me of a moment so strong it gave me goose bumps. Years ago, I was standing next to my cousin when my Aunt barged in the room, asking Carrie to make any wish she wanted. When Carrie said that she would love to attend a Michael Bolton concert and meet him, I felt our bond become stronger as that was what I suspected she would say. Curiosity itched in my skin and I ran out of the room after my aunt and asked her why she told Carrie to make a wish.

“It’s for a foundation called Make-A-Wish, Rach. They let people with similar conditions as Carrie to make wishes that they do their best to grant,” She explained.

“What kind of foundation?” I asked.

“ It’s called a non profit organization. One that raises money for families in need.”

Only a year later Carrie’s wish was granted. When hearing the news, I was overwhelmed with joy that my cousin finally was about to escape into the midst of her deepest dreams. The whole night turned out to be all that it deserved to be. With our formal dresses on and the men in their fancy suits and mundane ties, the black stretch limo arrived at seven on the dot. We were all waiting outside as the limo rolled up with the sign “The Loveridge family” on the left side of the windshield. It was my first limo ride, and I could feel the excitement creeping over me. Our bodies were drenched in sweat from waiting outside in the unbearable heat, yet we started to cool off as we piled into the limo like canned sardines. It was my Mom, Dad, Sister, Aunt, Uncle, cousin Lauren and of course Carrie, along with the Make-A-Wish

representatives that climbed into that vehicle of bliss. We all looked around at each other realizing we were sharing the same hopes that this night would turn out to be like a fairytale and exceed all of our expectations. I sat next to Carrie and she clasped my hand so tightly that I felt the loss of circulation coming on. It was as though I could feel her heart beat racing, and I knew that she was so excited yet unbearably nervous. We all wanted Carrie to forget her pain for the night and just live in the moment that she so longed for. And that is exactly what she did; she fully submerged herself in the music as if she were the only one in the room. The smile on her face was the size of a crescent moon and she danced as if not one person was watching. It was just her, there in that moment, and no other situation could have ever mattered to her.

I ran down the aisle of the elegant concert hall, to the front near the stage and danced along with my cousin. I wanted to feel the excitement that she received. As I continued to dance with her, I looked around and saw all eyes staring at us. In a crowded room full of adults, we managed to stand out.

After the concert was over, we all believed there was no way that this night could have gotten any better for her, but as it turned out, we were wrong. The Co-founder of the Make-A-Wish foundation who accompanied us informed us that we were actually going to be able to go backstage and meet her one and only admiration: Michael Bolton. He looked like a knock off version of Fabio in his white, half-buttoned flannel shirt, pinstripe black slacks and leather shoes. When conversation with Michael Bolton lasted for more than an hour, Carrie quickly climbed to the top of the world. He described to her his passion for singing and how

he had gotten started, continued on to describe his family traditions and then sang her favorite song. She loved each and every minute, and took in each and every word that he placed upon her as if they were her sole key for survival. He was to her as she was to us, so caring, giving, loving and positive at that moment.

“Carrie,” he reminded her, “you are one amazing person. Your family is blessed to have such a wonderful piece to their puzzle and I want you to promise me that you will continue to give love to others.”

“I promise, Michael,” She reassured him.

It was with that phrase that I realized all that my cousin had meant to me. She provided the love and friendship that had lacked in my life, and she always reminded me to care for others around me. The tears started to stream down my face as well as my family’s faces as we stood there with Carrie’s idol confessing his connection to her.

When the time came to go home, her light of happiness shined so bright that people could see it from another galaxy. She whispered to me, “ If I were to die at this very instance, I would be the happiest person ever.” I will never forget how important that night was to her. Accompanying her, and witnessing the many wonders that Make-A-Wish allowed my family to enjoy, it hit me straight across the face that I wanted to help other people with similar conditions as my cousin, and have a chance to embark in a life-changing moment.

That night I found my calling in life, I wanted to be an inspiration to many. I knew that this would not immediately affect my Aunt and Uncle, but that they would be proud of me for learning from Carrie’s experience. I witnessed the joy that

foundations could bring to others and immediately wanted to be apart of everything that they had to offer.

Going home the next day, I quickly jumped on my new discovery. I joined every organization I heard of: Give Kids the World, The Salvation Army, Special Olympics and many others. Since that day, I have volunteered for every opportunity available. I personally share memories with every family I am embraced by, knowing that through listening and positive thinking I could help change someone's life.

I quickly snapped back to the present and suddenly I was back in the hospital when my dad screamed my name in a voice so heart wrenching that I began to assume the worst. I ran back inside as the wind engulfed my body, just in time to be there with my family as Carrie passed away. It was one of the hardest things I have ever had to undergo, but I allowed the experience to change my life. Coming to college this year as a freshman, I have extended my want to help others by joining the Best Buddies Club, Habitat for Humanities and the Invisible Children organization. I wish to prolong this necessity to help others with unfortunate conditions enjoy their time on this precious earth and to help them really start to appreciate what they have.

I owe all of my success to my cousin as she has inspired me to shape my view of this world and to encourage others. She became my Michael Bolton as she helped me to better others, but also to better myself. Since her passing, I always appreciate every moment I am offered to spend with my family and try to take nothing for granted. Each time I hear those lyrics from "Lean on me," I am reminded of the huge

impact this memory has had on me.