

AN EXERCISE IN EMPATHY

a young woman's pledge to shave her head

The saying goes that you never know what someone has been through until you've walked a mile in their shoes. In the fight against cancer, it is so hard to understand the sheer gravity of the heartbreak and pain caused by the disease until you've lived it yourself. It seems impossible to walk a mile in the shoes of a cancer patient, but this year Notre Dame sophomore Rosemary Pfaff has found a way to offer empathy as best she can. Rosemary has decided to join the small group of women who shave their heads at the TBAB event because she wants, "to be in solidarity with all of those courageous women and men who have lost their hair during the cancer treatment process."

Over the past ten years, Rosemary has donated her hair four times – most recently at TBAB last April. She credits her decision to cut her hair to a play she acted in during middle school. In the play, a young cancer patient struggled with the loss of her hair until her older sister decided to also shave her head in solidarity. Rosemary remembers thinking that "the sister had done something truly beautiful." Different family members have also fought battles against cancer within her own family. While Rosemary never met her aunt, her mother shared that for her aunt, losing her hair during chemotherapy was the most difficult aspect of the treatment. Inspired by this amazing woman family members say was so much like Rosemary, she remarks, "I can't imagine

the strength it would take to not only go through such a painful treatment process, but to also lose any personal vestige of normalcy along with it." For Rosemary, shaving her head offers the chance to experience some of what her aunt felt during her cancer battle.

As a woman, the decision to shave your head seems like such a large act of solidarity because of the pride often associated with a woman's hair. Rosemary sees it not only as an exercise in empathy, but also a chance to remember that a woman's beauty comes from so much more than her hair. Having donated her hair in the past, she knows that while it might take time, hair does grow back. In terms of standing out, she notes, "I do think that being a bald girl will definitely cause more stares than if I were a boy, but I'm ok with that." The experience means so much more than changing her look for a while. It offers her the chance to express compassion and play her part in the fight against cancer. As a pre-med student, she believes that the experience of shaving her head will further develop her compassion, which plays such an important role in medicine.

During the months leading up to the TBAB event, Rosemary has set out to fundraise and raise awareness for the cause. With a goal of \$5000, she knows that she can make an actual contribution to cancer research. Through her own experience

in medical research this past summer, “I’ve become better acquainted with how much money it takes to make a real impact in research: a lot.” While her goal might be high, she knows that her efforts are what it will take to really win this fight. She has set up a TBAB fundraising account on Student Shop, and is accepting donations through April 15th. The money she raises will be donated to the St. Baldrick’s fund for childhood cancer research through TBAB.

In the time leading up to the event, Rosemary invites others to consider joining her efforts by considering donating their own hair or even shaving their heads as well. She advises, “Hair will grow back, so don’t worry about it. Changing it up a bit can actually be really fun, especially when you know you’re doing it for a worthwhile cause.” Registration for head shavings or hair donations of 8 or more inches is now open on the TBAB website! As for Rosemary, she has thought a lot about what lies ahead. “I’ve heard from girls who have shaved their heads in previous years that it is an experience that never truly ends, even when you get your hair back,” said Rosemary. “I’m looking forward to the insights I will gain through this fairly intense exercise in empathy.”

Register for head shaving or hair donations here:
<https://www3.nd.edu/~tbab/#register>

Please support Rosemary in her fundraising efforts here: https://shop.nd.edu/C21688_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=4607&SINGLESTORE=true. After submitting your donation, you can enter Rosemary’s name to help her reach her fundraising goal.

This February newsletter incorporates in green in honor of National Cancer Prevention Month and Gallbladder and Bile Duct Cancer Awareness Month.

