



Hardships inspire student

After undergoing chemotherapy Kayla Nebeker 'feels alive again'

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When type-four colon cancer forced Kayla Nebeker to take an 11-month medical absence from school three years ago, she spent most of her time undergoing treatment at Washoe Medical Center.

But as Nebeker battled her life-threatening disease, she noticed she wasn't alone.

"At first, I was anxious in the chemotherapy room with all older adults," said Nebeker, who was 19 when she was diagnosed in October 2002. "But they were all so nice and encouraging to me. They helped me to feel more comfortable and positive about the whole experience."

Her interactions with older adults as she underwent chemotherapy is part of the reason Nebeker chose to join the Gerontology Club, a volunteer organization of students that helps local seniors.

Nebeker, now 22, returned to the University of Nevada, Reno this semester despite the fact that she is still undergoing treatments.

She came across the club while attending an academic major fair on campus. When she noticed a sign for the Gerontology Academic Program, the idea hit her to join.

Nebeker became involved with many clubs and activities soon after her return to UNR. She served as president of the Student Nutrition Association and held a prominent position at her church and is currently Gerontology Club vice president.

"After completing my chemotherapy, I just wanted to feel alive again," Nebeker said.

The illness hit her hard not just physically, but emotionally as well.

She had previously kept a journal but stopped writing the day she was diagnosed.

"I was just under so much stress at that time, that whole period just felt like a blur," she said. "I think I blocked out a lot of those memories because it was so hard."

During her medical absence she lost her Millennium Scholarship.

"Funny thing about the Millennium Scholarship is that it doesn't matter what the reason is for withdrawing from school, you still lose the scholarship and have to prove yourself the next semester to get it back," Nebeker said.

But now that she's back, Nebeker dedicates much of her time to giving back to the elders of the community through events and community service activities put on by the club.



"I think that we are helping older adults feel like they are part of the larger community," she said. "Stereotypes and stigmas are creating a widening generation gap that only serves to separate communities."

The Gerontology Club engages in many community service activities each year such as the Alzheimer's Memory Walk and mural painting at Senior Bridges Psychiatric Ward.

"Older adults that I have worked with always seem so appreciative and grateful for the service the club members give and we are seeing lasting relationships between club members and members of the senior facilities we continue to work with," Nebeker said.

Nebeker said working with the elderly is a life-changing experience.

"My experiences with older adults helped me to realize all of the positive outcomes that came from my experience with cancer," Nebeker said. "At the age of 19 they helped me to understand the value of my physical life."