

Personal Statement

Life is like one big 'Connect the Dots' puzzle. Each dot represents a single, defining moment and the lines between are choices we make as a result. Like the dots, each individual moment is small and insignificant alone. The lines and our reactions, give us shape and define who we are. Some lines are dramatic, creating sharp edges while others are subtle, rounding us out. No matter the direction, each line has the potential to change the picture completely and make us into something completely new.

I will never forget the first time I heard the words Niemann-Pick. I was 12 years old and in seventh grade. My parents put my three younger siblings to bed and we sat on the couch to watch TV. This was pretty common except for one thing, my parents turned off the volume. They told me there were some things I was old enough to know and explained that all three of my younger siblings have Niemann-Pick Type C Disease (NPC). They explained the disease, its impact, and their prognosis. I kept going back to the median death age, 10. How could this be? My brother Braden was already 8, sister Riley 6, and brother Keaton 4. Just like that, a new dot was added to my puzzle.

Another dot was added when I started high school with a clean slate and 300 potential new friends. Two months later, Braden passed away. Dot. The months that followed were full of heartache and self-pity. I could not believe that my baby brother, the one I was supposed to protect and mentor was gone. I could not escape the knowledge that I would have to endure the same pain twice more. I fought with my parents and felt disconnected from my friends. One June afternoon after a particularly brutal argument with my dad, something clicked. I knew I had two choices: I could keep suffering or start fighting. In choosing the latter I made my own dot.

I've spent every day since, loving and appreciating my family. My parents and I are partners in battle and I see each day with Keaton and Riley as a celebration rather than another in a countdown. I take every opportunity given not only for me, for all four of us. In doing so, I have learned how to live a truly inspired life.

In 2008, my parents and I co-founded the Smith Family BReaK Thru Fund in honor of my siblings to fund NPC research. In six years, we raised over \$250,000 for research at Purdue University. Each August, family, friends, and strangers come together for our golf outing. There is rarely a dry eye on the course when Keaton says 'Go golf!' into the microphone and sends the players out for the day.

Now I am a 21 year-old Senior studying Marketing at Indiana University. Though they are 120 miles away, my siblings remain the center of my life. I maintain a positive attitude and encourage those around me to do the same. When I'm exhausted, I think of the strength it takes for Keaton to put one foot of the other and walk down the hallway or how despite weeks in the hospital, Riley can muster up a smile. Every day, they unknowingly inspire me, and countless others, to persevere. As a result, I am known as a ball of unique, positivity in a serious business school. Through the years, I have taught friends, teachers, bosses, and mentees that there is much more to life than a test, paycheck, or final grade.

Braden, Keaton, and Riley were sent to me for a reason. Someday I will use my story to inspire others the way they've inspired me. I don't know if I'll write a book or be a speaker or just lead by example, but I know somehow I'll teach people to persevere.

My puzzle is far from complete. Dots will come with graduation, new jobs, my own family and countless other changes. Someday I'll add two dots when I goodbye to Keaton and Riley. Without a doubt my future holds a mixture of wonderful and heartbreaking moments. No matter what happens, I will continue to persevere and draw my lines in a positive direction. In doing so, I will live my life for four rather than one.