The Gift of Courage is a powerful book about leading with love. It’s full of inspiring stories of courageous, purpose-driven people who are finding happiness while helping heal the world.

—Marci Shimoff
#1 NY Times Bestselling Author, Happy for No Reason, Love for No Reason, and Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul

This book is a reminder to us all that our finest moments are when we take those courageous risks to stand up to bullies or take risks on others’ behalf. In a world where we are often disappointed in the lack of courage in our national and local political leaders, The Gift of Courage is a respite. We see the difference everyday heroes can make in the lives of others. The reporting here is solid and the inspiration profound.

—Geraldine Laybourne
Former President of Nickelodeon and Founder of the Oxygen Network

Kelley’s story is one that anyone can take to heart, no matter what your particular challenge. The inspiring and honest telling of how she managed to come to a deeper, fuller appreciation of the gift of living is one of the good news stories that resonate within every life.

—Meryl Streep
Academy Award-winning actress

Ken Streater has created a collection of real-life stories that not only grip your mind and heart, they uplift and inspire you. The Gift of Courage is a gem. I’m personally better for having spent time with it, and you will be too. Read this book and you will be changed.

—Roger Seip
Author of the best-selling book Train Your Brain for Success

In The Gift of Courage Ken Streater has compiled a valuable reminder that there are among us, in our everyday lives, those who have faced life-crushing challenges and used the experience to better the world around them.

—Lynn Schooler
Award-winning author of The Blue Bear and Walking Home
THE GIFT OF COURAGE

STORIES OF OPEN HEARTS, PASSION AND PURPOSE

KEN STREATER
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To Leo Durand,

the most courageous and giving person I know.
No one is better than you at going with the flow
and knowing when to take a powerful stand.
INTRODUCTION

Faced with what is right, to leave it undone shows a lack of courage.

— CONFUCIUS

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.

— AMELIA EARHART

Those who know “why they are here” may tell you they have always known it—or that it just came to them one day. Others are just naturally generous and fulfilled and do not even ponder the meaning of their lives. Some did not easily uncover life’s purpose but ultimately found it by opening their hearts. I belong to this group. But for many, the search continues. This journey takes courage, and once your meaning is realized the rewards are magnificent and infinite.

The meaning of the word “courage” is “of the heart.” There are three types of courage: instant, assumed, and deep. Instant courage benefits others as an act of spontaneous bravery or giving, when a life is on the line, danger roars in as a here-and-now circumstance, or someone suffers in front of you. Think of saving a child from drowning, pushing someone away from a careening car, or just instinctively giving a hand, a hug, or a shoulder to cry on. These acts are from the heart even while you are not conscious of it in the moment.
Emergency personnel, adventure guides, leading athletes, soldiers, community and business leaders, and others who regularly place themselves in harmful or high-pressure situations exemplify assumed courage. It is both innate and developed through experience, and it is consistently available for members of this rare group to draw upon. This courage is an act of the heart and of the will.

Deep courage focuses on self. It is taking time to understand what truly matters to you, giving energy to rediscover your passions, and having the guts to kindly expose your heart—to yourself and to the world. This is the self-inspired courage that emboldens you to uncover and embrace your “why.” Finding your life’s purpose requires an open heart.

*The Gift of Courage* is about regular yet extraordinary people who use courage—instant, assumed, and deep—to live passionate and purposeful lives. They are changing our world. Some realize their purpose through searing experiences far beyond what most of us will ever endure. Others uncover it through prolonged introspection. The rest find it in a moment of chance. In every case these common heroes give from the heart. Their lives of purpose are gifts that radiate goodness and lift the universe. This is *the gift of courage*.

Here are stories of lifechangers, lifemakers, and lifesavers. It is likely you have never heard of any of them. They could be your neighbor or might live half a world away. Each has unique characteristics that embolden them with courage to live a meaningful life by serving others, an impact which permeates the bounds of space and time. Please meet:
**Jim Adams**, a devout fireman who was baked alive and survived through technology, grace, and a need to serve a greater cause. Conviction in his beliefs and commitment to a community of firefighters and burn survivors enables Jim to lead a rich, passionate life as he did before and since surviving an accident in which most others would have died.

**Kelley Kalafatich**, a pioneer world-class river guide who helped create a new third-world economy, worked to preserve wild rivers, inspired hundreds of young women to live their dreams, and who is now hoping to walk again. Kelley’s determination in the face of a life-altering illness illustrates the power of facing fears to realize a life of purpose.

**Josh Kern**, a white law school student who challenged the stigma of hopelessness in a violent black inner-city neighborhood with Thurgood Marshall Academy, a charter high school where every single graduate advances to college as a future leader. Josh empowers hundreds of at-risk children and young adults with confidence to pursue their dreams.

**Martha Ryan**, a care-giving program founder, along with former homeless mothers Judy Crawford and Carrie Hamilton, who now use their past hardships to help build bright futures for those who live on the streets. Their collective stories showcase how acceptance and self-forgiveness are necessary to serve others well.

**Jeff Leeland**, a teacher whose students raised money to save his son’s life, and who built an organization from that experience to save hundreds more lives and unexpectedly, his own.
Jeff’s compassion for others and himself reveals the cornerstone of a passion-filled life.

**Dennis Guthrie**, a highly decorated Vietnam War hero who buried his emotions during the war to save hundreds of lives and now shares them freely to save thousands more. Dennis’ devotion to fellow soldiers at times of war and peace empower him and countless others to survive the literal and emotional hell of war.

**Brianna Mercado**, a teenage cancer survivor who lost a precious year of her life fighting the disease. Now a young college student, she gives very ill children reasons to live through the gift of dance and laughter. With uncommon wisdom, Brianna teaches us how resilience—getting back up—is vital to joy and generosity.

**Eric Plantenberg**, a personal development leader who inspires people to realize their own personal summits, as he did by climbing Mt. Everest to raise money for children’s education in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Eric’s life and teachings spotlight introspection as a gateway to courage and an abundant life.

This book is woven with a thread of gratitude for opportunities, mentors, community members, and life itself. As I set out on this book’s journey, I had one friend in mind: Kelley Kalafatich. I wanted to tell Kelley’s story and to help her in the same way she has helped so many, including me. Nearly thirty years ago in a quiet African hut, Kelley and other dear friends gave me great comfort through a night of deep despair when I received news that my father had unexpectedly died back
home. I am grateful for the positive impact of compassionate people, as are others who are changed by Kelley and these other brave people.

To learn more about the character and impact of courage, I scoured the country. I found valiant, purpose-driven people in the inner city, the backwoods, and everywhere else in the fabric of America. For some, I had to look no further than my own community. People living their dreams are everywhere.

Courage is born of a simple desire to do the right thing. It forms when action is taken, even in the face of challenge or risk. Whether putting your life on the line or stepping just outside your comfort zone, risk is relative. Acting on your belief is not; it is required. This is courage. When a person accepts and embraces challenge and then takes action—by spontaneous demand or intentional dealings with personal fears—their unique greatness is revealed and shared with the world.

Those touched by purposeful people often pay forward that energy to another person or to their communities. Once in the world, courage spreads and multiplies forever. Courage always moves on. At Washington D.C.’s Thurgood Marshall Academy, teachers inspire achievement in the face of adversity. Students learn by their example and bring that knowledge and character into the world. The courageous uplift those around them, anytime, anywhere.

In this book, the term community is used loosely. It can be a group of firefighters, soldiers, river guides, or students; it is an organization or a cause. Your reading of this book forms a new community. Portions from the sale of The Gift of Courage go to the people, families, or organizations described in this
book. These donations help to cover rehabilitation expenses and fund nonprofits associated with their stories. By purchasing this book you are rewarding those deserving of recognition.

An old proverb states that gifts are meant to travel. Just knowing that these people make the world better could inspire you to be courageous and to act on what matters most. Thank you for taking time by reading these pages to discover the beauty of open hearts, the joy of caring, the meaning of purpose, and the gift of courage. Thank you for being a part of this community.

Note: This book is not a how-to manual on deep courage. That book is The Courage Compass: An Essential Guide to Finding Your Meaning and Purpose. In The Courage Compass, notable people and I will share what we’ve learned in coming to know our purpose. Those insights and tools are offered to help you on your journey of finding your “why.” See The Courage Compass website (www.thecouragecompass.com) for more information.
Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another.

—Helen Keller

I think Brianna’s main goal in life is to prove to everyone, every day, that the power of love is everything.

—Sabrina Mercado

An easy breeze cools Camp Okizu, a five-hundred-acre adventure retreat nestled in California’s Feather River watershed. Winds spill down this high Sierra canyon into the Sacramento Valley. The sky above shines with a million stars floating beyond granite peaks. A couple hours before the stars came out, kids ran, fished, super-soaked each other, shrieked with joy, and took deep pure breaths in the peace of this wild place.

Now a warm campfire glows as campers from six to seventeen years old finish their week-long adventure. It is almost time to say goodbye, but the week’s closing ceremony—
known as “Inspiration”—provides one more chance to laugh into the fading night, and reflect on a week of just plain fun.

Seven days earlier parents said goodbye as their children boarded a bus to the mountains. Pine cabins, a large bright dining hall with a vista deck, a medical station and an activities room, trails and creeks, kayaking and swimming, running and jumping characterize Camp Okizu. Boys and girls from different places make lifelong friends and sunshine and laughter temporarily replace what life is like back home.

The campers and counselors gather around the stage for the closing ceremony. The eight-year-old boys perform a skit about fishing in a camp lake, making fun of their favorite counselor’s instructions to land the fish by keeping the hook out of your ear. The twelve-year-old girls sing a newly-composed song about snoring in their cabin as a way to keep ornery bears and boys at bay.

Fourteen-year-old Danny reads a poem he wrote, expressing all the love and care he felt here at a time it was sorely needed. And fifteen-year-old Becky takes the stage with a humble request for counselors and fellow campers not to forget her. Before turning in for the night and the next day’s long ride home, kids on stage share what matters most to them with their new friends and counselors.

Camp Okizu is a place of refuge for children with cancer. For thirty-one years kids have come here to put aside hospital visits, hopelessness, and the strain of being different from their classmates. Bald heads are no big deal. Afternoon naps are a certainty. Living fully in the moment replaces wondering what the future holds.
“It’s a lot harder now than it used to be,” shared camp cofounder and angel on earth, John Bell. When the camp first started, children’s oncology protocols were far less sophisticated and successful.

“At the time we started Camp Okizu roughly half of the children with cancer died. Today, it is down to about 20 to 25 percent and getting better. We now have a reason to expect every child to survive and when some don’t make it we are crushed.” With tears welling, John recalled his time at various camps over the years, including one particularly hard one. “Within weeks of her request that night, Becky died. She was wearing her camp T-shirt when she passed away.”

About half of the volunteer counselors at Camp Okizu—a Sioux word meaning “to come together as one”—are cancer survivors or siblings of cancer fighters. They too spent time in hospitals, away from school, being different. Nicknames like LuLu, Beta, and Topeka replace counselor’s actual names as one reflection of the camp’s lightheartedness and intent to keep the distraction of “real” life away.

Other volunteers, like Amber—an oncology nurse who provides medical care at the camp—are available to help campers who cannot take breaks from their cancer treatments. “It lifts my spirit,” Amber spoke, as we surveyed a colorful meadow while campers drenched their counselors with pails of water. “And I can tell you with complete certainty that it lifts their spirits and is irreplaceably important in their healing.”

Most volunteers return summer after summer to strengthen and embolden others. They found their Camp Oziku experience a springboard into a lifetime of giving. Tiffany Chang,
who first found Camp Okizu as a teenage counselor, is now a pediatric oncologist and recommends the camp to her patients. Brianna Mercado, aka “Topeka” was changed by it as well. “Camp Okizu is a magical place, and I don’t know where I would be without it,” said Brianna.

A few years earlier in the early fall of 2005, Brianna swam toward the water polo ball with all of her fifteen-year-old might. She cradled it in her arms, treaded water in the mysterious way only strong polo players can, raised the ball above her head, and pumped it into the goal. Her teammates swarmed her and high-fived. Brianna was having the time of her life playing water polo, leading her dance class, and just hanging out with friends.

While primping for another ninth-grade day a few weeks later, Brianna felt a lump under her arm. She and her mom went to one doctor, then to play it safe another, who both delivered the good news: it was likely just a calcium deposit that would need to be removed “in the future.” For the next few months Brianna didn’t lose her stride. Her favorite color was yellow like a daisy in full bloom. Brianna and her twin sister and constant companion Sabrina, shopped, swam, and swirled around.

The lump continued to grow and change color and annoyed Brianna as it got in the way of swimming. A third doctor took one look at it, surgically removed it, and sent it off to the lab for routine diagnosis. A few days later the Mercados got a call that was far from routine. The doctor asked them to come down to his office as soon as possible, where he delivered the results of the lab test: Ewing’s Sarcoma. Cancer. With her mother dismayed and questioning the fairness of it
all, Brianna absorbed the news, but never asked, “Why me?”

An often fatal form of cancer, Ewing’s Sarcoma occurs most frequently in teenagers. Ninety percent of the cases occur with patients between five and twenty years of age. The average age is fifteen. It strikes only two in one million people, and only two hundred new diagnoses a year are made in the United States. The cancerous tumor is often found on the tibia, femur, humerus, or scapula or in the immediate soft tissue. If it metastasizes in the body, the odds of long-term survival are less than 10 percent. There is no genetic predisposition for families to screen for it before it manifests as a lump.

Within twelve hours of the diagnosis Brianna had her first appointment with an oncologist. He explained the need to treat this cancer aggressively to whip it. Within one week, Brianna was wheeled from the operating room with a fresh scar where the tumor once was.

Four rounds of chemotherapy immediately followed surgery, but some cancer cells remained. A second and third surgery led Brianna’s doctors to believe they had cut out all of the cancer cells, but with a nagging chance the cancer could still remain in her body. To keep it from resurrecting, she would need radiation and more chemotherapy that could last up to a year.

Chemotherapy kills just enough to get rid of bad cells and leaves just enough good cells to rebuild. That is why hair falls out, the body is riddled with open sores, and energy levels drastically plummet. “Right after her second chemotherapy Brianna was in pretty bad shape,” recalled Sabrina. “She was drained and her mouth and throat were filled with sores that made it too painful to do much of anything.”
From the time they were born Sabrina and Brianna shared a bed, even after their parents separated and they split their time between both households. Now was no exception. “As we lay in bed, I fed her the only thing she could handle: ice chips. I thought she was sleeping because she was so tired and hurt from the treatment, and her eyes were closed. But she summoned enough strength to quietly whisper, ‘Thank you.’”

Deep into her chemotherapy treatments, Brianna’s appearance scared people. Perhaps her gaunt face, bald head, and the dark circles beneath her eyes evoked a fear of death. She was not allowed many interactions with friends. Once an energetic teenager leading her swim team and dance groups, Brianna was now a frail young girl who struggled to enjoy a walk in the park.

At times all that remained was that spark faintly aglow, the essence that made her somehow powerfully different. “I spent the year with Brianna helping take care of her at the hospital, at my mom’s house and my dad’s house, and with schoolwork,” shared Sabrina. “While there were times that I felt she was the last person on earth to deserve this, she never did. It was as if she knew there was a greater purpose that would come from her being sick.”

Brianna recalled this stage of recovery: “It wasn’t until I was diagnosed that I became conscious of how many people are suffering. I will never forget the cries that I heard in the hospital as I walked down the hallway and saw rooms packed full of people of every health problem. I needed a way to inform others about this, to speak on behalf of those that could not. I chose not to hide. I walked around skinny,
scarred, and stuck with an IV, but with dignity. I had no hair, no eyelashes, no eyebrows, and not a trace of color in my face. But, I could still smile and I tried to do so with radiance. I had never felt so horrible, and yet so amazing. All I wanted was for the world to realize how many ordinary people overcome extraordinary challenges each and every day.”

Thousands of teenagers in the U.S. are diagnosed with cancer each year. (See article page 187.) There are thousands more each year who die from it. Parents, friends, and fellow students are all affected when someone they know and love is forced down this path with only a glimmer of hope. Yet through a forest of impenetrable odds, sometimes the individual gains strength and punches a path out of the dark.

“I fought for my life that year. Fourteen rounds of chemotherapy, twenty-five rounds of radiation, six surgeries, and over forty blood and platelet transfusions,” Brianna said. After she spent her sophomore year in this fight, test results revealed her cancer was in full remission and life could go on. “I was cut loose. I was allowed my freedom again. Free to be near germs and throw away my medication chart.”

Each child with cancer has a story worth telling, a story that incites wonder about the divine plan and gives deeper meaning to life. So why Brianna in this book, instead of another young hero? An inconspicuous Internet article about a small hometown organization reveals why. (See article page 189.)

Sandlot Hero is a nonprofit organization near San Jose, California. It was developed and is headed by Albert Perkins, whose son Justin lost his fight with cancer in 2008. Justin said, “I want to help people after I am gone.” His dad honors this
commitment with a platform to salute community members who make a difference. Justin made a difference fighting the stomach cancer that eventually took his life. The Sandlot Hero website tells his story:

Justin was diagnosed during his junior year of high school, shortly after the last football game of the 2003 season. Perkins faced the initial diagnosis with optimism and determination to overcome his cancer, refusing to allow cancer to dampen his academics as well as his zeal for sports. “[He was] soft spoken, an All-American kid… He was a great football player and was a great kid who loved his teammates,” Perkins’ former football coach Jeff Mueller said.

During his senior year, Perkins was in charge of conditioning the JV football team. Before undergoing chemotherapy, Perkins promised himself that he would play on the varsity football team as a senior, and he fulfilled this promise, playing in the last three games of the year. “It was a really big deal when he got out [on the field to play], and he got standing ovations,” Mueller said.

The inspiration [for Sandlot Hero] originates from Justin, whose resilience and courage in his fight with cancer inspired his community. The Sandlot Hero is someone you know from your community that inspires you. Our goal is to share the stories of the ordinary people who do extraordinary things each and every day.
“There’s always going to be a pain in my heart,” Albert Perkins said in a 2011 Cupertino Patch article. “But I can smile watching the recipients of the award, knowing they have the same passion my son had, knowing people are remembering my son.” Perkins founded the award program with friends Steven Young and John Loiacono.

“This award is meant to inspire kids to do things that last beyond their lifetime,” said Young. The word “sandlot” in the award’s name represents a symbolic playground, where everyone enjoys doing life without a particular agenda. “We are looking for those who are serving above and beyond the call of duty,” said Loiacono, “for students who take initiative to help the community—not because they have to, but because they want to.”

Brianna Mercado was the first ever Justin Perkins Sandlot Hero award recipient. She received the award for volunteering with community organizations that help children. “Justin and I had the same doctor and probably had the same chemicals pumped through our veins,” recalled Brianna. “He was a great guy and once I knew he passed away, I knew I wanted to stay involved in Sandlot Hero in every way I could. I am living Justin’s dream. We want to inspire people to make changes in their community that matter. Changes that last.”

“I found a calling by volunteering,” said Brianna. “One of the first opportunities I took was at Camp Okizu. When I was a camper in 2007, Okizu gave me the strength and hope I needed to overcome my battle with cancer.” Okizu remains an integral partner to children fighting cancer. “Without my Camp Okizu friends there were times that I felt ashamed and alone,” Brianna continued. “Once I realized that there were so
many others like me I became even stronger. The love that I received from the staff was overwhelming. I wanted to be just as loving as they were with me. Because of this I felt a need to give what I knew to other cancer fighters and their families.”

John Bell and Dr. Michael “Mike” Amylon, a retired pediatric oncologist, created Camp Okizu from scratch. At the time, John volunteered at a hospice facility in Marin County where a friend of his died of cancer. His friend was in his forties and without kids of his own. This inspired John to create a program for young cancer patients.

Mike and other pediatric oncology doctors in the Bay Area attested to the need for this camp. A mutual friend suggested that John discuss his ideas with the oncology doctors, including Mike. They met and pooled common goals and interests to create a fledgling program with thirty children, hosted at a rented girls’ camp near Sacramento.

John owned a travel agency in the Bay Area that helped fund the program and ultimately bought land to build a new facility. It quickly grew to accommodate two thousand five hundred campers a year—an expansive but modest resort dependent on the generosity of donors. No one has ever been turned away due to a lack of space as the programs and facilities continue growing. And it is always free to participants.

“My grandfather, who was Pennsylvania Dutch, believed in community. I can remember when the whole valley would come together to harvest each other’s wheat fields. Maybe that is where my desire to give comes from,” reflected John. “All I know is whenever I participated in the visualization exercise that gave the choice of carrying someone or being carried, I
always pictured myself doing the carrying. I have always wanted to help.”

Hundreds of campers each summer come to Okizu to escape the fears and frustrations of their illnesses. Programs also include camps for siblings of cancer victims who receive special attention that is otherwise directed to the sick child in the family. Okizu sponsors teens and twenties adventure getaways, family camps, and bereavement retreats for families who’ve lost a child for them to hold and help one another.

“Much of the evolution came simply from parents and others asking for help and us responding,” explained John. “We saw or were asked to fill a need and created a program to do that. The sibling camp is an example. We operate the only camp we know of for brothers and sisters who suffer in different ways, but suffer nonetheless, along with the sick child.”

“Camp has given me a certain confidence,” shared a recent oncology camp participant. “I walk different, I am a lot more social, I am at peace at camp, not worried about anything, and I’m not scared of anything. To see what camp does, look at the children’s faces. You don’t see the scars, you don’t see the pain, you see complete contentment.” A younger camper wrote of his experience as well, “I miss camp so much and miss everyone. I have missed the smiles on all your faces and the songs we sing.”

John Bell sinks into the back of a couch in a bright alcove just off the dining hall at Camp Okizu. A warm sun bounces off his shoulders and illuminates the room as campers enjoy a siesta on the decks next to their cabins. He tells the stories of families who have come and gone, of children who first came as campers, survived cancer, and now return year after year.
as counselors. People never really leave Camp Okizu and it never leaves them. He recalls a recent visit from a woman who first came to the camp in 1985. Her son and grandson are volunteers at Okizu to this day. John struggles to find the most meaningful out of a lifetime of memories but settles on one.

“One summer we had a twelve-year-old girl camper who was completely blind,” said John. “Without being asked and with no one saying a word, other kids her age—who themselves were sick but not blind—took her by the hand and sat down with her over the first lunch. They cut her food; told her what was on her plate; helped her eat and ate with her; picked up her dishes; put them in the wash bins; and then walked outside arm-in-arm and down a path to their next adventure.”

It is the courage and empathy of children that astonishes John most. “The kids are so brave and leave such a mark. To have them come back year after year is such an amazing feeling. For them to become volunteers to carry on the legacy is very humbling.”

The volunteers—whether returning campers, college students, retired people or someone taking a week off from their job—are the backbone of the organization. And the benefactors who give so much make it all happen. “Without their donations and without the volunteers we would be lost,” continued John. “We are all connected and I deeply feel that whenever I am here.”

Brianna knows the power of this connection and the healing it brings to sick children. Now five years cancer-free, Brianna approaches a critical milestone. If treated early and aggressively with surgery and massive doses of radiation and chemotherapy, Ewing’s Sarcoma victims have an over 70 percent survival rate past their fifth year of treatment.
In the year before heading on a celebratory European adventure with her sister, Brianna volunteered in the afternoons after her morning classes at University of California, Berkeley. Brianna also works at CoachArt, a nonprofit organization that offers classes and lessons in art and athletics to children with chronic and life-threatening illnesses and their siblings. For a few hours each month, CoachArt activities shift a child’s focus away from the illness and toward another reason to live—inspiring them to achieve in violin lessons, voice coaching, soccer practice, or dance classes.

Today, Brianna teaches three young friends a few new fancy dance steps. They stand in front of a large mirror, spinning, talking, laughing, stretching, and reaching for the stars in an hour-long ballet lesson. At the end of the lesson they hug and set a date for the next class. Brianna is hopeful that her young dance students will feel well enough to kick up their heels at the next lesson. She knows progress on the dance floor and on the health front, and she understands how the last hour was a crucial reprieve for these young girls.

Based in Los Angeles since 2000, CoachArt sought to expand its programs to serve the youth of the Bay Area and pursued its new location in early 2011. CoachArt Regional Director Ashley Fontanetta supervised this operation. She set up an information table on the Berkeley campus to garner interest and volunteers and up walked Brianna.

Brianna embraced the CoachArt mission and spearheaded the creation of its Berkeley branch. “I believe it was because of her own personal experiences with life-threatening illnesses and dance that she immediately saw the value our programs
bring to kids,” said Ashley. “She is a natural leader who is highly respected because of her incandescence. She truly understands healing.”

“I think Brianna’s spirit has been with her all along; hers is as strong as I have ever felt in anybody,” continued Ashley. “I don’t think she realizes just how much she gives and means to people. She is kind and caring, and seems inexhaustible. Everyone who knows Brianna describes her the same. She never once questioned her disease, but used it to put hope in the hearts of others. Because of her kindness and dedication to helping others, the world is her oyster,” said Ashley.

In addition to her class work toward a double major in dance and social welfare, and volunteer work at Camp Okizu and CoachArt, Brianna dances her heart out with friends who created Main Stacks, an award-winning hip-hop troupe. This twenty-one-year-old student was recently appointed as executive producer of the Northern California chapter of Prelude Urban Dance Competitions. Brianna also speaks at various engagements to high school students, encouraging them to live life to the fullest.

“We are all different because of her. Along with many others, I would not be the same person without her. She showed us strengths we did not know we had,” shared Sabrina. Brianna and Sabrina’s parents divorced when the twins were ten, and they did not speak to each other for years.

“Now, we can all laugh together in the same room. My family is closer and my life more rich because of Brianna and all that she went through. I think Brianna’s main goal in life is to prove to everyone, every day, that the power of love is
everything. She was like this before she got sick and is even more so today. She lives her life in a way to illustrate that care and compassion are all that matters,” said Sabrina.

Brianna says she does not know which came first: her ease or disease. She does know that giving to others does not require any magical energy or battle with a life-threatening disease. With a little desire and a little time for a sick child in a hospital room, an impoverished family at a food bank, a senior citizen in a retirement facility, or someone who simply needs a hand with groceries, anyone can bring warmth to someone’s world. Brianna’s resilience and giving in this vein is profound:

After being a year out of school, I returned with the pure motivation to live life to its fullest. I didn’t look at my year off as a setback, but as a reason to step forward and begin my new journey as a survivor. While I was sick I was forced to find the light in every situation that I encountered.

When you are stuck in a bed all day with nothing to do, you look for inspiration in the littlest of things. I danced when I could, visited my teammates at school, and loved interaction with people. This just motivated me more to get better. This is what got me through the tough times.

I always keep an image in the back of my mind of the children I met in the hospital. I know how badly they had wanted to be living a healthy life again. I volunteer for this reason and a thousand others, all based in the natural desire to share love and make lives
better. What I get back is immeasurable. We should all be bringing positive change to the world—not to fulfill a requirement or to improve a resume—but simply because it’s what we should do.

In a schedule crammed with classes and homework, kids to play with, dance shows to train for, and friends and family to spend time with, Brianna added one more thing. She joined Big or Bigger, an action-oriented organization that utilizes social media and community to improve society. Brianna organized and facilitated the Berkeley Dance for Cancer events to provide awareness and fundraising for various cancer research and treatment organizations.

“Several hundred dancers came together. We raised just under two thousand dollars with this event,” said Brianna. She also created the BriPositive Challenge to help people have fun, live their dreams, and passionately share their goodness with the world. The challenge encourages others to dance like no one is watching, join the bone marrow registry, watch the sunrise, and give blood. People from around the world have embraced Brianna’s suggestions.

“About things I want to do, I always ask myself: ‘If not now, when?’” Brianna said. “Then I take action right away.” In the spirit of John Bell, Brianna Mercado, Becky, and so many others, everyone should apply urgency in their quest to help others. Now is the time to make the world a better place.
On average, every high school in America has two students diagnosed with cancer. It is the leading cause of death among children under the age of fifteen. Every day thirty-six children or adolescents are diagnosed with this disease.

Today, the rate of cancer among children is increasing faster than any other age group except those over age sixty-five. The causes of childhood cancer are unknown and thus most preventive measures are unavailable.

While medical research and new treatments for childhood cancer are vastly under-funded, there are organizations dedicated to helping cancer patients win their battles. Many are small grassroots programs. Camp Okizu, CoachArt and Sparrow Clubs are examples.

These entities give victims and their families financial support, periods of joy, shoulders to cry on, education, and much more. Other national entities assist by sharing information, funding, and providing actual medical care for young cancer victims, like Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation.

Alexandra “Alex” Scott was first diagnosed with cancer at the age of two. In the ensuing years, she fought the disease and built a lemonade stand at age four to raise money for other pediatric cancer patients. She said she wanted to give the money to doctors to “help other kids, like they helped me.”

Her first stand raised two thousand dollars and more money each subsequent year. Before she died at age eight, her organization raised over one million dollars for cancer research.

News of this brave girl’s efforts circulated the world, and people collected local funds with their own stands to give to what is now a national organization. From this poignant beginning, the foundation has raised millions more dollars for childhood cancer research.

Since 2006, Alex’s Lemonade
Stand Foundation has provided over two hundred grants to doctors and institutions creating diagnostic and curative measures to fight childhood cancer.

Dozens of private organizations diligently generate income to fund cancer research and patient care. Top-rated nonprofits—those directly funding research instead of advertising and director’s salaries—including the National Cancer Coalition, The National Comprehensive Cancer Care Network, and Alex’s Lemonade Stand.

These organizations collectively provide hundreds of millions of critical dollars to childhood cancer research. However, the federal government still provides the lion’s share of research funding.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) is the U.S. government’s primary agency for cancer research and training. Approximately half of the NCI budget is allocated to research grants awarded to scientists who work at local hospitals and universities.

More than 6,500 research grants are now funded at more than 150 cancer centers and specialized research facilities located in 49 states. In 2010, NCI was provided 5.1 billion dollars from the federal government.

NCI is an agency in the National Institutes of Health. The NIH is funded and directed through the Department of Health and Human Services, which operated with a budget of 78.7 billion dollars in 2010. By comparison, the Department of Defense had a budget of 663.7 billion dollars.

Cancer research receives only a small portion of the Health and Human Service budget, less than 1 percent of the monies dedicated to the military and related industries. This ratio is troubling. It can only be adjusted by the political will of the people to direct lawmakers’ priorities.

For Justin Perkins, Brianna Mercado, and the thousands who suffer each year, it is prudent to work toward cancer cures through research. Two primary actions are needed: donate to causes that treat and improve the lives of those suffering from childhood cancer, and contact lawmakers about the need to create a more philanthropic budget.
Justin Perkins and Sandlot Hero are regularly mentioned in a small, community-driven Internet newsletter called the Cupertino Patch, which is part of the national Patch network.

In twenty-three states and dozens of towns across America, this national media service with local editorial control is an excellent resource for objective and balanced reporting in its respective regions.

Patch succeeds as a “community-specific news and information platform dedicated to providing comprehensive and trusted local coverage for individual towns and communities.”

There are thousands of alternative news sources from which to choose. As the American public is inundated by main stream media networks and cable television news, alternative news blogs and websites proliferate (Goodnewsnetwork.com, Happynews.com, and Wikinews.org are a few).

While Patch has experienced an interesting evolution from a small local conglomerate to a national corporate operation, it maintains local editorial control.

Justin Perkins wanted to make a difference in people’s lives after he was gone. Through Sandlot Hero and the people it salutes, his dreams are coming true.

The reporting on Sandlot Hero’s positive impact—by a news source that highlights collective and individual good—allows Justin’s legacy to thrive. Choosing responsible information sources empowers honest media outlets with greater force in our society.