



Improvise, Adapt, & Overcome

Belén López, a freshman business major and cancer survivor, does work study in the CBU Admissions office to supplement her partial scholarship.

Financing a college education in the United States is challenging for freshman Belén López, but if anyone can find a way, it's this tenacious young Mexican woman who has overcome Hodgkin disease.

BY VICTORIA TILNEY McDONOUGH

On the evening of May 2, 2003, Belén del Socorro López was doing what many other high school seniors were doing: primping for the prom. Her blue sequined dress hung just right over her willowy frame, makeup enhanced her dark, pretty features and her short hair curled playfully around her face. But unlike most girls her age, her biggest concern wasn't which boy was escorting her or what kind of corsage he would pin upon her dress. For Belén, attending the prom was a victory, a milestone. She had been granted special permission to attend the event by her doctor at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital; just a week prior, she had been in intensive care, recovering from pneumonia—a danger for someone recuperating from a bone marrow transplant.

"I told her she looked all fou-foued out," grins Lou Ann Vaught, Belén's teacher in the St. Jude School Program. Bringing her student to the hairdresser and helping her dress and apply makeup is not part of Vaught's job description, but Vaught knew how important it would be for Belén to attend the prom, especially since she had been too sick to attend the year before. "I told Dr. Benaim (Belén's doctor) that he had to let her go," Vaught says. "I would keep my cell phone on and make sure she called to let me know how she was the minute she got back to Target House. I mean, how could I not help her get to her prom when the kid might be voted queen?"

Although Belén was not voted prom queen, she was one of only a handful of class-chosen "attendants in the queen's court" and barely left the dance floor all evening. "When she got home," Vaught recalls, "she phoned me and said: 'Lou Ann, guess what? I danced with 12 guys!'"

Belén smiles when she recalls her prom. "Everyone was surprised I was there. I had been in the hospital the week before, very sick with an infection in my blood. Going to the prom was fun," she says. "And good for my soul. It's a natural thing for a teenager to go to the prom. I danced a lot. I'd sit down after a dance and then another boy would come up and say: 'Dance with me, Belén?'"

As a reminder, Belén keeps a small photo of herself in her wallet, her prom dress sparkling under the party lights.

An unplanned move to America

When she was 16, Belén made her first trip from a small town near Guadalajara, Mexico, to the United States. She and her mother were visiting an uncle in Kentucky; the trip was part vaca-

tion, part celebration. Belén was in remission from Hodgkin disease, a diagnosis she had received two years before. As she was frolicking in her uncle's pool, Belén's arm started to hurt. That night she could barely lift it, and red blotches appeared on her neck. The following day, her mother took her to the hospital, where the doctors referred her to St. Jude.

The cancer had returned.

What was to have been a short holiday in America became two and half years in Memphis. St. Jude became the landscape of her adolescence. Almost immediately, Belén started an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy and radiation. In October 2001, she underwent a bone marrow transplant. Not even 10 months after that she had to endure another one.

Pondering those early days at St. Jude, Belén realizes how far she has traveled—physically, spiritually and intellectually. "When I was first here, I didn't know any English," she says. "The nurses would ask me how I was feeling and all I could do was point to one of the faces on the pain chart. I couldn't speak in sentences, only in words like 'vomit' and 'pain' and 'stop.'"

Although Belén could barely communicate with her doctors and nurses, she never stopped thinking about her education and how she could keep on track.

Two months after earning her high school diploma from Memphis Catholic, Belén celebrated the one-year anniversary of her bone marrow transplant. She was given a clean bill of health. "This is good," comments Ely Benaim, M.D., who has become close friends with Belén and her mother. "Belén had such an aggressive disease, needing the second transplant so soon after the first. That she has been in remission for over a year is good, good news."

Belén is now a college freshman on partial scholarship at Christian Brothers University in Memphis. She is anticipating the day she completes her master's degree in international business and hopes that that degree will open career doors in this country and others, including her homeland.

CBU or bust

To say that Belén is focused and driven would be a gross understatement. Ask anyone. "Belén always wanted to talk about attending college in the United States and how she could go about doing that. She is a very focused young lady," says J.B. Donley, a volunteer at St. Jude. ▶▶

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Joining forces to help patients become students

Christian Brothers University and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital have joined forces to help patients become students.

When Belén López decided to attend CBU, her main hurdle wasn't academic. Like many other college students today, financing her education was the greatest challenge.

J. B. Donley, a retired Memphis businessman and benefactor, is also a volunteer at St. Jude. He saw Lopez's resolve and decided to help her and others in her situation. The result was the CBU/St. Jude Scholarship Program. The St. Jude Scholarship at CBU was established to provide financial support for those students who are met with the challenge of working on their college degree, but are also in need of treatment at St. Jude.

"A hallmark of the university since its founding in 1871 has been making higher education available to all who qualify academically, regardless of financial ability," says Brother Stan Sobczyk, CBU president. "The St. Jude Scholarship Fund is the newest part of this legacy, and we hope an attractive option for interested benefactors."

"The St. Jude Scholarship is an initiative that represents the partnering of two institutions whose missions are similar in char-

acter," adds Ruth Carr, CBU director of annual giving. Carr worked with the fund's initial benefactors to set up the agreement between the two institutions. Besides Donley, the other donors to the first year's scholarship fund are Ralph E. Franklin, Geraldine McCormack, Katherine M. Minkin, and Mary Alice Quinn.

"At present, the scholarship is set up as an annual fund, which means money must be raised every year to keep it going," Carr explains. "We're hoping that eventually someone will step forward and fully endow the fund." Endowed scholarship funds provide for a student during his/her four years at CBU and also provide funds to the university in perpetuity.

The program now faces the challenge of raising the funds necessary, so it can meaningfully help a large number of students like Belen make a better life for themselves, in spite of the hardships and trials they have endured.

To become a partner with CBU in supporting the St. Jude Scholarship Program, contact Ruth Carr in the CBU Office for Institutional Advancement at (901) 321-3271 or toll-free at (800) 283-2925, or email rcarr@cbu.edu. Gifts can be sent to CBU/St. Jude Scholarship Fund, Christian Brothers University, 650 East Parkway South, Box 104, Memphis, TN 38104. ■

"What always impresses me about Belén is how resilient she is, no matter what comes her way, especially for someone in a totally new country. She's tough, smart, a real go-getter," says Donley, who still meets Belén for coffee every week or so.

Another heart she has touched belongs to Michael Bunyard, administrative director of the hospital's Ambulatory Care Unit. While writing a high school essay on international business careers, Belén interviewed Bunyard, who speaks several languages. He insisted that she interview him in both Spanish and English. "What amazed me about Belén was her ability to make the best of any situation," says Bunyard. "A lot of her strength comes from her mother, Socorro. She was an incredible support mechanism for Belén. I admire her a great deal; she reminds me of that Nietzsche quote: 'What doesn't destroy you makes you stronger.'"

"Watching the love and respect they had for each other, I would say they were an ideal model for a mother-daughter relationship.

"Belén makes me think of a slogan from my military background: 'Improvise, adapt and overcome,'" adds Bunyard. "She could have been the poster child for that motto."

Keeping perspective

To stay positive during treatment, Belén kept busy. Even when she

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was weak and sick, she attacked her school assignments as if each were a small mountain to conquer. From the time she started school in America as a non-English-speaking junior until the time she graduated, her grades leapt from Bs and Cs to consistent As.

Meanwhile, Belén befriended other patients and discovered a love of art. Her self-portrait, done in pencil, shows a face with eyes that express a freedom of spirit; an acceptance of what is; an understanding of the world in all its whites, grays and blacks. The gently sketched face is one of an old soul, looking into the middle distance.

"My father said that when I was a kid I was always busy painting and drawing," Belén says, smiling sadly. Her father, who has had diabetes since he was 15, is now on disability after having had both legs amputated. She says she misses her father, sister and her mother, who has now returned to Mexico. "But it is good to feel

independent," she says as she looks out the window of the campus cafeteria. "I need to continue with my life without my mother by my side."

One of the ways Belén seems to keep focused is through her ability to stay positive and hopeful. Although she feels stronger and healthier by the day, having spent the last several years as a patient at St. Jude has been draining. "I think I'm a different person than I would have been," she says. "I see life differently because of the cancer. I will go to parties at college like other people my age, but I also know that I want to study hard and do things in my life, and I don't want to do anything bad to get off track."

Belén smiles when she thinks of St. Jude and all the friends she made there. But she keeps many of the memories tucked away; they are too painful to revisit. Belén made friends with two girls her age—both Arabic, both recovering from bone marrow transplants. "The nurses made a party for one of them and me because we had the same birthday," she says. "That girl ... died a month or so later."

Around the same time, the other friend also died. Belén pauses, thinking.

"They were both fine, my friends; then they weren't." Remembering, she starts to cry, then pulls herself straighter and forces a small smile. "That was a hard time for me," she says. "We

were friends. They are in a good place now. I try not to think about it too much."

Life is beautiful

Although Belén is struggling to make ends meet, she was recently given a used car to commute between school and the home of the family who has invited her to live with them. Now and then, she hopes to take a break from her studies and go with friends to enjoy some Memphis music or to a movie, something she has always enjoyed. "*Life is Beautiful* is my favorite movie," she says thoughtfully, as if she can see the celluloid images rolling. "I first saw it when I was 12. I've seen it lots of times. It is sad and beautiful. There are many layers."

When asked what advice she might offer a young girl, like herself, arriving at St. Jude, she answers: "That is hard to say. I would give her all my support; if she needs anything or wants to talk, I would be there. But it's difficult to say. Everyone is different. I would want to say to her that everything will be okay... It would be hard to be honest, you know, to tell her about everything she would have to go through."

Gazing at the bustling college morning beyond the window glass, she adds: "I would tell her that she would have to be strong, and that God always does the perfect thing." ■

Students stay “Up ’til Dawn” to help St. Jude kids

Five months of hard work paid off at 7:30 a.m., Saturday morning, February 28. But the pay-off didn’t go to those who had put in the time and the thought and the labor for all that time. Instead, the students and staff members who made up CBU’s inaugural Up ’til Dawn Class of 2004 (and had actually been up all night) handed over a check for \$34,896 to a representative of St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

Up ’til Dawn is a student-led, student-run program hosted by colleges and universities nationwide wherein students educate their community about St. Jude while raising money through a variety of fund-raising activities. The name of the program comes from the campus celebration of their fundraising achievement — a finale event that literally keeps its participants “up ’til dawn.” This year, more than 100 campuses are participating in the program, and they expect to raise more than \$1 million nationwide.

Up ’til Dawn began at the University of Memphis in 1999, and one of the first participants there was Whitney Rice. When Rice assumed the position of director of student activities at CBU last summer, one of her first goals was to establish an Up ’til Dawn chapter. “I am quite proud of the dedication that our students gave to the program in its inaugural year at CBU,” says Rice. “As their advisor, it was very rewarding to see all of their hard work and comforting to know that our students truly care about helping those in need. As a founder of this program, it warms my heart to see our students make Up ’til Dawn an important part of their lives. This is an experience that they will carry with them for life.”

“Whitney and I went to a conference last summer and decided to just go ahead and implement it,” says Megan Wortham ’05, who served as director of the CBU’s executive board. “We really had to rush. Most programs start their year in the spring; we started in August. We put together a board and kicked everything off at orientation.”

With an orientation event for freshmen and their parents called “Kiss Your Kids Goodbye” and a kick-off party during the first week of fall semester, the new program managed to get some needed publicity and campus exposure. “It’s hard to get people involved in something if they don’t know what it is,”



Rachel Riser, Katherine Kuhn, Cynthia Holmes, and Kelsie Mans at the Up ’til Dawn grand finale in De La Salle Gym.

Wortham says.

“I grew up in Memphis, so I knew about St. Jude,” she adds. “But a lot of the out-of-town students needed to be educated about it and exposed to it.” (Megan is the daughter of Dan Wortham, Class of 1971, and CBU vice president of administration and finance.)

They quickly signed up 200 participants in the new program, who either pledged to raise at least \$150 individually or \$750 per six-person team. The majority were students, but staff members from the Student Life office and Plough Library also formed teams. The methods of raising money were left up to each team and individual participant, and they ranged from auctions and charity sporting events to a wine-tasting (for faculty and staff only, sponsored by the library’s team). “Canning,” which means standing outside events or on street corners with empty cans and directly soliciting donations, was also a popular activity; one team raised more than \$3,000 canning at local basketball and football games.

But letter-writing parties are the signature fundraising events of Up ’til Dawn. During these events, fueled by food and entertainment and spurred by visits from St. Jude patients and staff, participants come armed with an address book of up to 50 names, mainly of friends and family members. St. Jude provides the letter and the postage; all the sender has to provide is the name and address.

Wortham says the letter isn’t a blatant appeal for money. “It’s

mainly just an explanation of what St. Jude is and what it does,” she says. “That’s usually enough to inspire someone to make a donation. Even so, they say to expect only about a 25 percent return on the letters. We did a little better than that.”

In fact, nearly 75 percent of the money CBU’s chapter raised was through its letter-writing campaign.

But Up ’til Dawn is not only about fundraising, Wortham says. “A lot of students volunteered at St. Jude, gave hospital tours, and donated platelets. It’s about being involved and raising awareness. And, of course, it’s a natural connection because

a lot of CBU students and student organizations were already involved with St. Jude service activities.”

So, what about that all-night party at the end?

“We were pretty ragged by the time we actually presented the check,” Wortham laughs. “It was a good party. We put it on with no budget at all. Local restaurants donated the food, a couple of bands played for no charge, and we even had a hypnotist come down from Chicago and perform for free. And people were still bringing in money up until the last minute.” ■ — CORY DUGAN

Spanish teacher brings holidays to Target House

When adjunct Spanish instructor Cristina Michta saw Belén López on campus at CBU for the first time, she was surprised.

“I asked her, ‘What are you doing here?’” Michta recalls. “When she said she was going to school here, I could have cried.”

Michta knew Belén from Target House, the housing facility for long-term St. Jude patients and their families. Located in mid-town Memphis, Target House opened in 1999 with a \$27 million donation from Target Stores and its partners. Its 96 two-bedroom apartments provide privacy, independence, and support for patient families who need to be at St. Jude for over 90 days (and up to three years).

“I was a volunteer at Target House before there was a Target House,” Michta says, explaining that she started working with patient families at a previous support home called Hospitality House. Realizing that many of the families, like Belén’s, were from Latin American countries, Michta started offering English classes and volunteering as an interpreter.

“The family members need attention too,” she says. “The parents and the siblings are in this situation along with the patients, far from home and often not able to communicate their needs and their concerns.”

Many members of the CBU community outside the foreign language department know of Michta from her solicitations for donations to her Spanish classes’ holiday parties at Target House. Appeals go out every Halloween, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and Easter for donations of candy and gifts for the children; Michta says the people at CBU are more than generous. At other times of the year, the classes throw smaller parties and volunteer for organized craft activities with patients and their siblings.

“These kids want to be as normal as possible,” she says. “They want to play and go to parties and eat candy just like any other kid. And the parents have enough to do. Any little thing we can



Cristina Michta (center, seated on floor) with members of her Spanish classes at their Target House Halloween party.

do to help, especially at the holidays, is so appreciated.”

In addition to the party activities, Michta’s students also volunteer their time and increasing language skills to teach English to families and Spanish to Target House staff members. After a few phone calls, Michta found that Houghton Mifflin Company was more than happy to donate textbooks to aid in their efforts. “It’s good for the students too,” Michta says. “Both from a community service perspective and for their Spanish language experience.”

Michta’s involvement with St. Jude and Target House is also personal — she lost a sister to cancer, and her husband is a survivor. “It’s so good to see how much the success stories are increasing,” she says. “The first family I worked with, I had to interpret for them so they could make arrangements after their child died. I’m a mom, too. You come home and see your healthy child, and you realize just how lucky you are.” ■ — CORY DUGAN