

**Note: names have been changed to protect the privacy of the student and the family.**

The summer before my freshman year of high school I went on a mission trip with my youth group. I awoke early that morning and packed the lunch for my crew. We went to our worksite and continued building a wheelchair ramp. By the close of the day, the ramp was halfway complete and I was happy to know how much of a difference this ramp would make in the paralyzed man's life. Feeling satisfied with our work, we cleaned up and headed back to the dorms for the night. In the middle of the night, my youth leader woke me up and led me to a room where I saw my mom weeping.

She told me that my sister Rebecca took her own life that day.

Rebecca wasn't even seventeen years old.

I had known that Rebecca was in pain. Only months before Rebecca had overdosed, trying to take her own life. I tried to be optimistic about the future, to be the big sister for her. I had planned things for us to do weeks in advance to give Rebecca something to look forward to. Rebecca always looked for the best in people, so I tried to do the same, becoming the type of person who would do whatever it took to make someone else happy. In the end, this wasn't enough.

When I heard the news, I was crushed with waves of emotions. I didn't know how to carry on when my sister could not. I was fourteen years old and lost the person most dear to me. I wanted to blame myself for being gone that day, but I knew there wasn't anything I could have done. I spent the rest of the summer going through the motions.

When I entered high school as a freshman, I was known as the girl whose sister died over the summer. I did not want to be "that girl", the girl that everyone pitied. I decided that I was going to determine how people viewed me, not the other way around. Every day I pushed myself to be better than I was the day before. I became the person all of my friends came to when they had problems. My friend Beth knew that I would not judge her when she was dealing with an abusive relationship, and I became the shoulder that she cried on during this phase of her life.

Every adult in my life admired how strong I was and said that I was mature beyond my years. Not being invited to a friend's party did not matter to me because I knew there would always be more. The way I look at a situation and decide that, in the long run, it doesn't matter has earned me a lot of respect.

I wanted to do as well in high school as Rebecca, a straight A student, had. I had always worked hard in school, but I knew that if my sister could be an amazing student, then I could too. As a result of my hard work, I have maintained an A average every year, even while taking many honors classes.

I have come a long way since being the sixth grader who wanted to take care of her older sister. The past has taught me to embrace life's challenges head on. The only thing that we can do in life is push forward; there is no going back and changing what happened. I have not let the events in my past define who I am, but they have molded me into the person that I am today. Even though the memories of the past are still painful, and I miss Rebecca very much, the past has made me a stronger, more mature person. I am ready to face the challenges that await me in the next stage of my life: college.