

rochester

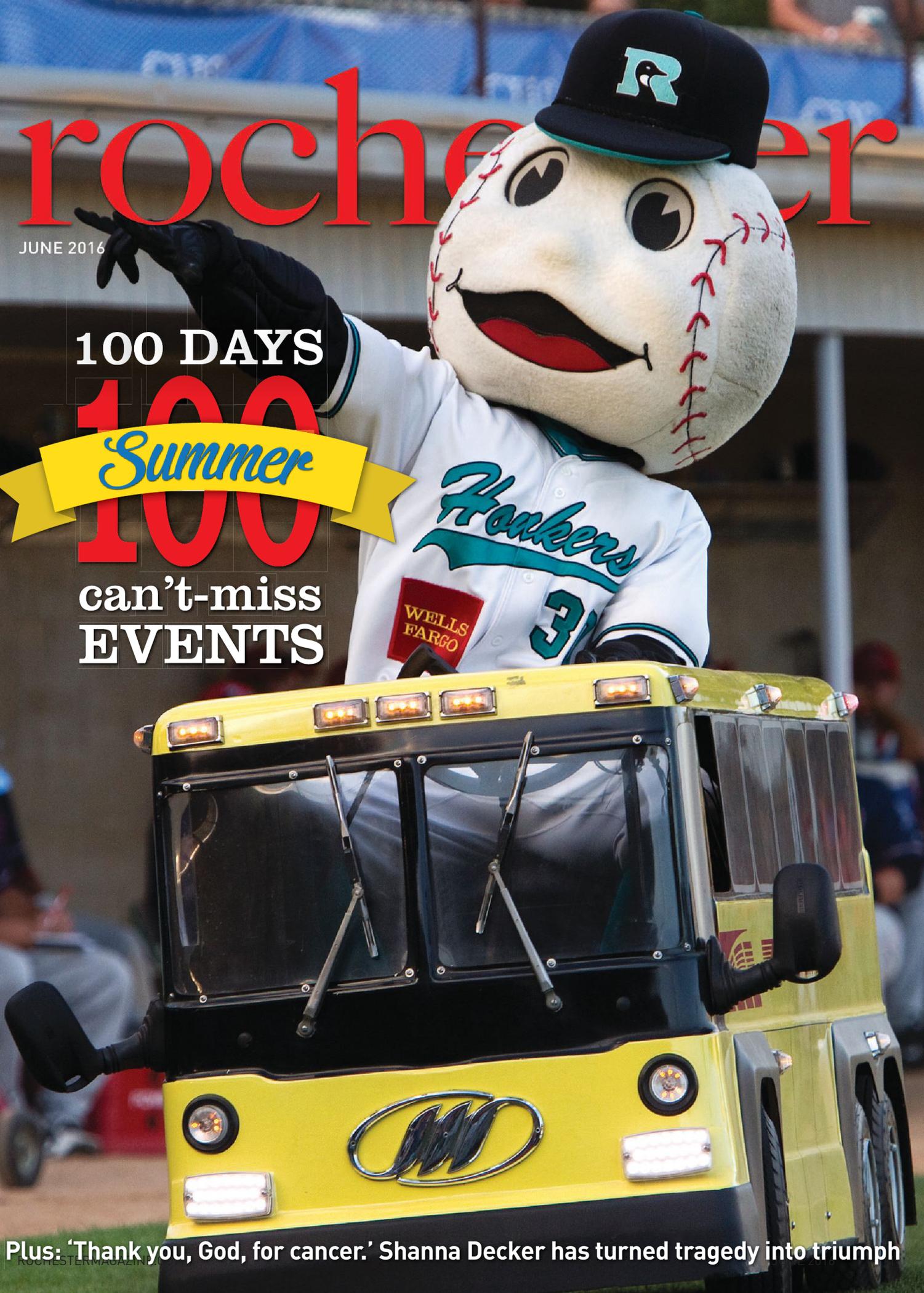
JUNE 2016

100 DAYS

100

Summer

can't-miss
EVENTS



Plus: 'Thank you, God, for cancer.' Shanna Decker has turned tragedy into triumph



Photo by Elizabeth Nida Obert

26



32



Photo by Elizabeth Nida Obert

20

Features

26 "Thank You, God, for Cancer"

At age 25, Shanna Decker—cancer survivor, national speaker, and Hearts of Hope founder—has become a voice for kids with cancer.

32 100 Days of Summer

From the Honker's season home opener (June 1) to that first high school football game of fall (September 9), we've got your day-by-day calendar for summer fun. And we really do hope you read every last entry, because it took us a long time to put this thing together.

20 Be a (Local) Beer Expert

Whether you're a fan of Budweiser or Guinness, Blue Moon or Heineken, here's your beer-by-beer guide of which craft beers to order at Rochester's four brewpubs. Bonus: Ale? Lager? Hoppy? Malty? Get the details.

10 In this issue

13 Short cuts

Rochesterfest A to Z; Rochester Civic Theatre's Summer at the Civic returns; Thursdays on First & 3rd by the numbers; "Porch swing, cocktail, my favorite person" and more can't-miss summer events in Six Words [or Less]; more.

14 Oddchester

16 Random Rochesterite

Phlebotomist Jeff Austin tells us about his connection to Laura Ingalls Wilder, the moment that changed everything for him, and his craziest adventure ("I took a big, red, bold marker and wrote: 'Help! Kidnapped!'").

62 Scene about town

A record number of attendees (525) raised a record amount of money (\$114,000) at Dancing for the Arts—Take V.

66 Ten (or so) questions

Rochesterfest Executive Director Brent Ackerman tells his *Purple Rain* story, recounts the time he did a radio traffic report from his bedroom, and tells us whether he can shorten the parade time.

On the cover: It's our annual 100 Days of Summer story. Get your day-to-day guide of the season's best events starting on page 32. Photo by Scott Jacobson.

In this Issue

rochester
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Volume seventeen | Number one

Rochester Magazine is produced monthly by the Post-Bulletin Co., L.L.C. and distributed throughout Rochester, MN. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission. Editor, *Rochester Magazine*, 18 First Ave. S.E., P.O. Box 6118, Rochester, MN 55903-6118 or SLange@rochestermagazine.com. Call 507-285-7775 or 866-665-2323 for home delivery (\$20 for 12 issues).

Three things you didn't know about this issue. Until now.

1. Our **"100 Days of Summer Story"** (on page 32) is far more time consuming than you (or we) would ever imagine. The tracking down of events! The gathering of photos! The fact-checking, for god's sake, the fact-checking! Anyway, we managed to find one event for every single day from June 1 to September 9. So—and we don't like to threaten—you had better read this thing, and use it all summer long.



2. But then, whenever we'd start whining about how difficult it was to finish our "100 Days of Summer" story, we'd go back and take another look at **"Thank You God, For Cancer"** (page 26). Because if that doesn't give you perspective about being positive, nothing will. **Shanna Decker** (pictured with a young cancer patient) lost her leg to cancer at age 7. By age 8, she was already speaking publicly—and using her allowance money to make small gift boxes for other kids with cancer. Today, at 25, Shanna has become a sought-after public speaker, a lover of life, and, most importantly, a heroine to kids fighting cancer.

3. Finally, speaking of perspective and positivity, here's a story that didn't make the cut for our **"Random Rochesterite"**

interview with **Jeff Austin** (page 16): "I do like to write. I've written articles for the North Star Blade Collectors Club. Mr. Anderson's reading class at Mayo High School drove my passion for reading and writing. And I had the honor of running into him—I drew his blood, actually. I told him how much he inspired me, and how his class changed my life. And the reaction when I told him? He was just so lit up. I can't even describe it. He appreciated the fact that someone went out of the way to tell him. Because he was just doing his job. But teachers can change lives."

Voted **"Best Indian Restaurant for 10 consecutive years"**

WINNER: Best Indian Dish (Tandoori Chicken)
FINALIST: Best Vegetarian Dish (Vegetable Samosa)

—Rochester Magazine

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“Thank you,
for God,
cancer”

At 25, Shanna Decker—cancer survivor, national speaker, Hearts of Hope founder—has become a voice for kids with cancer

Story by Renee Berg | Photos by Elizabeth Nida Obert

When Shanna Decker strides into Dunn Bros in Rochester on this 60-degree spring day, she's wearing a plaid shirt, light aqua tank, shorts and sneakers, her prosthetic leg on display.

Decker, a 25-year-old cancer survivor, is unabashedly herself, and probably wouldn't think to cover her amputated leg. In fact, she's so unabashedly herself that when, as a teen, she was invited to share her story on CNN, she inquired whether she could "talk about Jesus." Told no, she couldn't, Decker passed. "I went on Fox News instead," she quips, laughing. "Who needs CNN?"

Decker says she can't tell her story without referencing Jesus. She can tell her story, however, sans tears. She's come that far.

than a handful of friends made in the cancer ward. Except. Except she found a rewarding life there, too. She and her fellow patients played pranks on the nurses, squirting them with syringes full of water, among other highlights. Good-spirited, jovial, fun-loving Shanna (pronounced "Shawna") got herself back, through chemotherapy and through losing her hair and through six surgical procedures, including what was then a little-known procedure called rotationplasty. During the 12-hour procedure, surgeons removed the middle portion of her left leg, including the knee. Her lower leg was then rotated 180 degrees and reattached, thereby transforming her left foot into her left knee. Nine months after her diagnosis, in January of 1999, Decker left Mayo Clinic, cancer free.

At 7 years old, Shanna heard a Mayo Clinic oncologist tell her parents, Sherrie and Jack, in a dark brown room on the twelfth floor of the Mayo Building: "Shanna has cancer."

It all started at age seven, in Plainview, Minn., when Shanna fell walking to the bus stop. Her leg had been hurting for weeks, and she had a doctor's appointment scheduled for later that day. After falling, she debated—should I walk home, or to the bus stop? Which is shorter?

She opted for the bus stop and proceeded to school. Later, she learned she'd spent half a day walking on a shattered femur; an orange-sized tumor had busted through. By later that day, she was on crutches. Not much longer than 24 hours later, she heard a Mayo Clinic oncologist tell her parents, Sherrie and Jack, in a dark brown room on the twelfth floor of the Mayo Building: "Shanna has cancer."

And so it began. A nightmarish tale of childhood cancer, an illness that claimed the lives of more

Unfortunately, the joy was short lived. Mayo doctors found an enormous mass in her lung in September of 1999—one which they and doctors at Johns Hopkins, among other consulted specialists, thought cancerous.

"It blindsided us," says Shanna's mom Sherrie. "If cancer, it would take her life. This was a death sentence they had given to us."

Doctors couldn't biopsy the mass for fear of spreading cancer elsewhere, so surgery was the only way for them to determine its definite cause. That night, before surgery, Sherrie prayed as she'd done before, when Shanna was seven and the family was given her initial cancer diagnosis. Sherrie prayed as she'd done before: on her knees, begging the Lord to let them keep their youngest for a while longer. She prayed so hard, so intently, for so long, sweat dripped off her face.

*Photos, from left:
Shanna at age 7.*

*Shanna, 7 or 8, celebrates
Halloween with her older
sister, Melissa.*

*Seven-year-old Shanna goes
through physical therapy.*

*Shanna visits recently with
Hanna Keehr, of Oronoco, a
friend who happens to be a
cancer patient, at Mayo Clinic's
St. Marys Hospital.
(Photo by Elizabeth Nida Obert)*



“When she went in for surgery, my husband and I were picking out funeral songs because, if this was cancer, there wasn’t a lot left they could do,” says Sherrie. “I remember the doctor walking into the waiting area and I was prepared to hear, ‘This is cancer.’ He started telling me, ‘We removed everything; we removed two lobes of the lung but preliminary testing cannot find cancer.’ I didn’t even hear him. He said, ‘Did you hear me? We cannot find cancer.’ In my mind, I was given a miracle. I asked the Lord to please give us a little longer and it must have been his will, because he did. I think Shanna went on to live her life for the glory of the Lord. And that’s what she’s done. He knew his plan for her was for her to speak to kids and make an impression with her life.

“I went into a bathroom off the waiting area and laid down on the floor,” Sherrie says. “I thanked the Lord on a cold bathroom floor because I couldn’t get low enough. I cried for 10 minutes. That’s how much it meant to me. I couldn’t be low enough at the feet of the cross to thank the Lord.”

Today, 18 years past her initial diagnosis of bone cancer, Shanna has an array of bullet points on her life’s résumé: double major from Winona State University, achieved on scholarship in 3-1/2 years; program coordinator for the University of Minnesota-Duluth’s MBA program in Rochester; prominently sought-after public speaker; winner of nine national awards for volunteerism for her dedication to families fighting cancer; founder of her own philanthropic project called Hearts of Hope; and closely affiliated with Brighter Tomorrows, a non-profit organization benefiting families touched by childhood cancer.

Whoa. Remember, she’s 25.

But then again, she got her start early—she started her public speaking career at eight years old. And many of those résumé bullet points, above, were provided to us by her mother, Sherrie; Shanna’s too humble to share them. Shanna’s mom also shares the story of how so

many of the 8,000 attendees lined up after one of her daughter’s speeches to talk to her. Shanna was whisked away from behind the Chicago theater, where her name was up in lights, by a limousine that was mobbed by supporters. So yeah, she’s kinda famous.

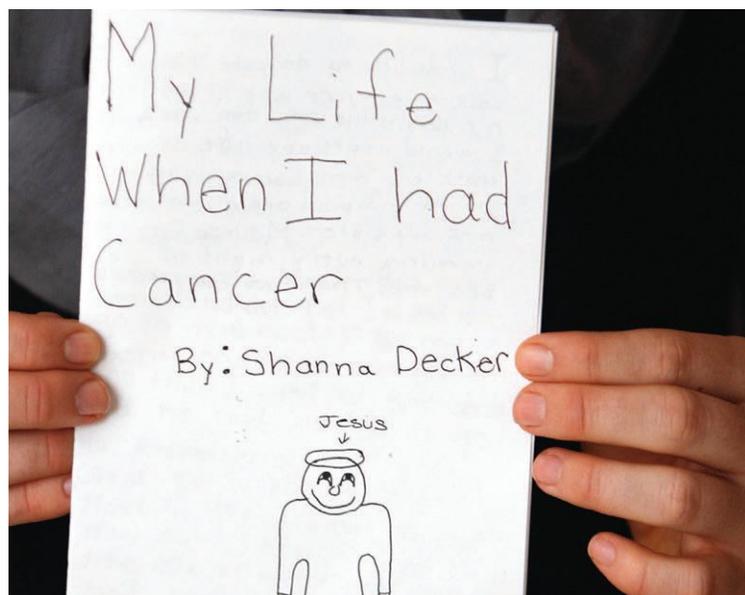
Shanna’s also performed 2,000 patient-care visits, and her uplifting speaking engagements can draw upwards of 30,000 people. It was a Top Ten national honoree designation, awarded through the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, that made her realize, “I had a platform for doing even bigger things.”

“It was definitely transformative,” says the woman with glasses and jet-black hair pulled into a no-nonsense businesswoman bun. “That was the first time I ever realized my impact was wide. For me, it’s about getting to know people personally and becoming a friend to them. When parents or kids are struggling, no one can say ‘I understand.’ I’ve been there. I don’t even need to say it. I just am there. That’s an opportunity where you can make an impact on someone’s life and change the trajectory.”

She has, and she does. Upon entering a hospital room for a visit, Shanna gives patients a Hearts of Hope box—a small collection of toys and trinkets tailored to whomever she’s visiting. It’s a tradition that, according to her mom, began when Shanna was eight and started putting together boxes “with her own little allowance money.”

Shanna has, over this past decade and a half, become a heroine to kids who are struggling—who, like she once did, question whether they’ll survive. Shanna comes, and sits, and listens, and tells them, “If you need to throw up, I don’t care. I’ve been that kid. I’m here for you.”

“I thanked the Lord on a cold bathroom floor because I couldn’t get low enough. I cried for 10 minutes.” —Sherrie Decker, Shanna’s mom



“What else would I do with my time other than make an impact on the world?”

—Shanna Decker



Throughout it all, Decker has maintained a strong sense of self, saying that cancer doesn't encapsulate her. There are too many other words one could use—such as faithful, athletic, and devoted. Like many women her age, she glows about her recent fiancé, Ray, a doctor of physical therapy and a professional musician, gushing over his Facebook photo. She hopes to one day marry and have kids like her older sister Melissa, who is mom to two of Decker's beloved beings, a niece and a nephew. She intends to travel the world speaking publicly about her No. 1 topic: love.

Love? C'mon, Decker attended more funerals by age 16 than many of us do in a lifetime. But, still, she insists she carries one overarching message, and that is: Love wins.

“I think a lot of that comes from having a second lease on life,” Decker says. “Knowing life is short. I can really make a difference in people's lives just by being present for them. For me, it's a ‘Why not?’ sort of thing. What else would I do with my time other than make an impact on the world?”

How deeply felt has been her impact? One little girl, Sherrie Decker recalls, couldn't get out of bed after rotationplasty. Shanna visited and requested solitude with her. “All the adults left,” Sherrie recalls. “Ten minutes and Shanna came down the hall with this little girl in a wheelchair. She's done that with so many kids where adults can't get them moving, but Shanna gets them moving. They relate to her.”

“Thank you for putting yourself out there so others can have hope and not be afraid,” reports one mother of a boy who faced rotationplasty, as quoted on Decker's becauselovewins.com website. A 17-year-old cancer patient says, “Many times you were my happy thought when I thought the pain would never end.” And in 20 years of attending Lions Club events, a member said he only witnessed one speaker receive a standing O: Shanna Decker.

Cancer survivor Hannah Kelly, 19, was 10 years old when she met Decker at the Ronald McDonald House of Rochester during a Brighter Tomorrows gathering. The two clicked right away, and later they toilet papered Kelly's hospital room as well as those of other cancer patients. “One of the dads told my mom he hadn't seen his daughter smile like that in three months,” Kelly remembers.

She goes on to call Decker an inspiration, and says that after one surgery, Decker was in Kelly's room visiting as promised. They sang *High School Musical* songs, and Decker helped her to the bathroom. It was all in a day's work for Decker, who still keeps in touch with Kelly. They've visited each others' homes, and Kelly sees Decker every summer upon her return to Rochester for Mayo check-ups.

“She was very, ‘It's going to be OK,’” says Kelly, a Michigan native and elementary education major, of having Decker visit her in the hospital post operation. “She was that friend who was very supportive and calming. You weren't alone. She's already gone through it and she's this image of what you will look like when you're all done. It's not the end of the world, and she lets you know you can get through it and persevere if you have someone by your side.”

For Decker, it all goes back to childhood. She says she was born a giver; God helped her find her path in life, and her school-girl journal tells the tale.

Written on a plain piece of notebook paper, Decker inscribed, “Thank you, God, for cancer, because it taught my family to love each other.”

Thank you, God, for cancer? Yes. Decker says she still feels same.

“To be someone's hero? A lot of people are always looking for their purpose in life, and to be that to those kids, honestly, it makes me feel like I am just doing what I was meant to do.”