

Bad Hair Day
By Alicia Rose DiNatale
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Today was perhaps the most discouraging days of this whole trial. I've been to school about a dozen times since my absence and I've never ONCE had a problem with wearing a hat or bandana to school. It must have been a full moon because I wasn't stopped by just one teacher, but FOUR!

It started when I went to the Senior High office to ask them to page my teacher because I was supposed to meet her before class began. One of the secretaries said, "You need to take that hat off!" and I said, "I really can't right now." She looked at me strangely before I quickly said; "I'll just go check her room and see if she's there now" and I rushed out of the office holding back tears. As I was walking down the hallway another teacher passed by me and said, "Miss, you need to take that hat off" I retorted, "I really can't right now" as I felt the tears welling up inside. "Well why not" he said as he stopped walking and turned to me. "Because I have cancer and I'm bald". I burst out the front doors where I started crying. I couldn't help it. I don't know where it came from but I couldn't stop myself. I was feeling pain, shame, embarrassment, and anger for what reasons I wasn't sure. Part of me cried, "why do I have to have cancer?" And the other half stormed "Why do they have to be so ignorant?" I guess it was the confrontation that got to me. I was a mess of emotions struggling to find calmness in a sea of tortured emotions. When I had sat outside and calmed down enough I walked back inside and into my chemistry teacher's room. Then I realized that I had brought the wrong binder and I called my dad and asked him to bring me the right one. He drove up and I climbed into the car and started to cry again. My dad's face was sick with worry. Immediately he started to ask, "what happened? Did you throw up? Did you faint?" "No." I said between sobs, "I (sniff, sniff), was walking through school (sniff, sniff), and two teachers (gasp), asked me to take off my hat (sniff), and I had to tell them that I had cancer." As soon as I finished a wave came over me and once again tears flowed like a bursting cloud. My dad's face suddenly went soft and he tried to console me, "Do you want me to go in there and tell them? Do you want me to talk to your class so no one messes with you?" "No, no I'm fine now." I lied. I didn't want my dad to have to worry about me more than he had already. "Classes are switched now so I should be fine." "You sure you don't want to go home?" he asked and I could see in his eyes that he was absolutely crushed that his little baby daughter was so hurt. He wanted to take me home so I could lay in his arms and he could make everything better for me. And I wanted to go home and be with people I knew loved and understood me; where I was safe from the harassment I had felt at school. I looked back at the school where all the students were hurrying to get to class and saw a place that was no longer safe to me. All it was was ridiculing eyes and condescending stares. I looked at my dad again and saw the loving home I yearned to be at. So safe and warm. Then I looked at myself and said, "If you don't go back in there, you'll never want to again. You can't let their ignorance defeat you! You're stronger than that." I stepped out of my dad's comforting watch and went back in school to face my torture. My dad slowly drove away but not without reassuring me that if I couldn't handle it, then he would more than love to pick me up. I sat through Chemistry half-sniffing, which I wasn't able to hide due to my weak lungs. And as it turned out that was exactly what my Chemistry teacher thought was wrong with me. I walked after class with my friend and didn't really say anything about the incident. I didn't want to start a big scene.

As I walked into the lunchroom alone, I was confronted once again and the nightmare seemed to be nearing. "You'll have to remove that hat", stated a male teacher. "I really can't" I tired once again, but he wouldn't let me go that easily. "And why not?" "I have cancer" the words stung like a reopened wound. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said apologetically. I held in the tears because I didn't want my friends to see me like that. I sat down and started to ear with my friends. Then I saw a teacher look at me and start to walk over. "Oh please NO!" I yelled in my head. When was this going to end? "You have to take off your hat." She said. I did everything in my power to keep from crying so I smiled, jokingly laughed as I looked at my friends and said, "I can't . . . I have cancer." My friends knew that it wasn't a big deal for me to say but they had NO idea what had happened proceeding to this. "Are you kidding?" the teacher said in half disbelief, half puzzlement. I was shocked! "No I'm not." I said in disbelief myself. What kind of question was that? "Because some kids have used that excuse before." What kind of person would say they had CANCER as an excuse to wear a hat? I was speechless. So finally my friends who were agitated that this teacher had the audacity to question me, finally told her that I was telling the truth. That did it, and the teacher retreated back with an embarrassed look on her face. It really irritated me that my friends had to validate that I had cancer for a teacher to believe me. I put my head down and quietly sobbed for a few seconds before my friends seemed to notice.

At the end of lunch my guidance counselor came up to me and handed me a note. It read: "Please excuse Alicia DiNatale from wearing a hat. She is medically excused. If you have any questions contact me."

But it wasn't much help now. The damage had been done. As I was walking out of lunch, the male teacher who had confronted me earlier said that he was truly sorry and he had no idea of my condition since he hadn't been informed. It was some consolation but still, it was the only sincere apology I had received. And I was still angry that the female teacher didn't believe me. Next, I went to my Gifted and Talented Seminar class. It's kind of like creative writing class that does all sorts of projects and discussions. This was "presentation week" and so I got to see my classmates present their projects. After my class, I decided to stay in and watch another class, since I was concerned about walking in the halls and being confronted again.

After that class my mom picked me up and told me how proud she was of me for staying as long as I did. I told her about the other two incidents since my dad had only known about the one incident in the Senior High. She told me that she had already been at school and spoken to my counselor and the Principal of the Senior High, which is why my counselor had given me the note.

When I got home I went to my room and cried. I just had to get it all out. My dad came in and offered to take me to see a puppy we were thinking of adopting. I told him I wasn't really up to it. My mom suggested that I write about my feelings, and I replied that I would after I calmed down. I finally got my thoughts together and composed a letter and wanted to send it to school, to the administration in order for them to see how rotten I felt in this whole experience. I think I did an excellent job of making the administration understand how badly I was made to feel that day at school.

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To Whom It May Concern:

Hello, my name is Alicia DiNatale. In school on Friday, I had one of the worst days ever. I never thought a school could be so insensitive to a student's condition. Since I was diagnosed with cancer in September, I've been to school about a dozen times. So, I was incredibly shocked when I was questioned about my hat, not once, but FOUR TIMES! I know that the teachers who asked me didn't know, but that's the problem. Having to confront a teacher whom you don't even know and defend yourself by telling him or her that I have cancer and I'm bald, as you could assume, is a very sensitive topic and one that's been very hard for me to deal with. Unfortunately, no one can truly know how I feel unless they have been through all that I have been through. So having to be reminded four times that I have cancer and that I'm bald is still hard for me to handle. Especially when you're at a place where you think you are safe. Before I went back to school, I was afraid the other students would make it hard, but now, they are the reason I can bear it, because the teachers are the ones making it the hardest.

After the first two people confronted me, I called my father and sat in his car crying for 10 minutes. When I finally had calmed down, I went back into class and then to lunch, where I was confronted two more times. The first teacher was very apologetic. After lunch, he came up to me and told me he was sincerely sorry and he had not been informed. But the other teacher didn't even believe me when I told her! It wasn't until I had to tell her at least three times in front of my friends who also told her my story was true, did she believe me and walked away, obviously embarrassed, (which she should have been). I've never heard of a student who claimed to have cancer so that they would not get in trouble for wearing a hat. It's not something you joke about. By then, my mom had been around the school and my counselor gave me a note excusing me from not being able to wear a hat; but it was too late. The damage had been done.

I went home half in shock, half in tears. I couldn't believe these teachers could be so ignorant to the fact that I had an illness. Not trying to be conceited at all, I did think that everyone would have been notified of my condition. I would just like for someone to notify the right personnel as to my situation, so I will never have to face that horrible confrontation again.

Thank you for understanding and cooperating,

Alicia Rose DiNatale