

HIGHLY MOTIVATED

“I’m a great believer in luck, and I find that the harder I work, the more I have of it.”

- Thomas Jefferson

Time is of the essence. Duke University student Josh Sommer has chordoma, a rare form of cancer with an average survival rate of seven years. Josh had been volunteering in the research lab of Dr. Michael Kelley, an oncologist who is working to find a successful treatment for chordoma, but he soon realized that one person working in isolation in one lab wasn’t going to get the job done quickly enough.

That’s when Josh and his mom, Dr. Simone Sommer, established the Chordoma Foundation. Partnering with the National Institutes of Health (NIH), they successfully brought together chordoma researchers and scientists from around the globe in communication and collaboration.

Pretty amazing for a 19-year-old engineering student. But then, Josh is highly motivated to help find a cure.

Born tinkerer

As a child growing up in North Carolina, Josh had aspirations of attending Boston’s MIT and becoming an engineer—“I used to tinker with electronics and take radios apart and build stuff.”

When he was in high school, Josh and his mom became quite ill and eventually lost their home to toxic black mold. This disturbing experience directed Josh’s interest toward environmental engineering. He wanted to find a way to detect and measure toxins produced by mold in an indoor environment. It became Josh’s high school science project, which earned him a semi-finalist rating in a national high school science competition sponsored by Westinghouse. The project became a passion.

Josh was accepted at MIT and had offers from a couple other prestigious engineering schools. But he was interested in continuing his research and was looking for professors that shared his passion for indoor air quality. Duke University had Dr. Claudia Gunsch, which sealed the deal for him.