

2017 CSCGP High School Teen Essay Contest

3rd Place Winner

An Unexpected Passenger

By Brooke Kelly

My mom and I have traveled through life together for over seventeen years. When I reflect on some of our most memorable moments, I often think about the times we have spent sitting side by side on one of our innumerable car rides. Within the confines of my little car seat in our not-so-little minivan, I remember watching my mother as she cautiously drove my brother to school in the middle of a snowstorm. I remember seeing my mother's amused face when she overheard the giggling of my friends and me in the backseat on our way to a soccer tournament. I have witnessed her deposit heaps of sweets and dozens of her iconic homemade cookies into the trunk for one of my class events. The image of my mom that I hold so dear today can be greatly attributed to the memories I created on our car rides together. Whether it is a five-minute ride to school, thirty-minute trip to our favorite restaurant in the city, or a two-hour journey to the beach, the time my mom and I have shared together in the car has been a crucial component contributing to the growth of our relationship.

However, out of all the journeys my mom and I have taken throughout our seventeen years together, there is one in particular that I will forever be able to vividly recall: the car ride in which my mom told me she was diagnosed with breast cancer. My soccer team had just won a semifinal game in a state cup tournament. Therefore, when I got into the car that night, I was ecstatic. The lingering feelings of excitement and celebration from the end of the game seemed to fade the further we distanced ourselves from the field. I stigmatize that night in my memory by the overwhelming sense of darkness that was cast over the car. The bright colors of the dashboard and the headlights of the cars whizzing by seemed more luminous than usual, providing a glowing quality to my mother's kind-hearted face as she drove.

When the moon reached its peak and the surrounding darkness completely encroached the highway, my mom turned to face me and in her familiar mollifying voice, she told me of her diagnosis with breast cancer. While she explained the details of the diagnosis and the information given to her by the doctor, my typically calm character was shattered by an instant burst of panic. My throat began to burn as I struggled to restrict sobs from escaping and tears from flowing. The streetlights and billboards that were once radiant and defined were being blurred into a whirl of color by my glassy eyes. However, the sound of my mother's voice brought me back to reality, replacing the intense sense of dread that briefly possessed me with an aura of positivity. She challenged me to remember how brave she was.

Cancer snuck into my life like a winter in Philadelphia. One day, all the kids at school are playing outside under the sun, clad in t-shirts and shorts. The next day, a chill enters the air and a looming sense of darkness replaces the once sunny skies for a seemingly endless period of time. Getting into the car with my mom that spring

night, both of us feeling elated and victorious, I was not expecting cancer to accompany us on our way home. When I finally became aware of its presence, all the burdens and details it carried with it bombarded me at once in what seemed like the world's most one-sided dodge ball game. First, I learned about the logistics of my mom's treatment. Then, I learned about the specific kind of cancer living within her, which affects about one in eight women. My mom happens to be one of eight children, seven of which are female. As I discovered more and more, I couldn't help but think about how I too was once a growing mass of cells inside my mother, but whereas my presence provided the promise of life, the cancer living within her hinted at the possibility of death. These kinds of thoughts perfectly illustrate the way cancer can warp one's mind, making it susceptible to an unhealthy and morbid outlook.

In the following summer months, there was no time for my family to have this negative outlook. My mom's cancer compelled us to utilize all our strength and energy to focus on doing what we needed to do to restore her health. Included in our game plan was the process of cold capping, a medical technology that prevented my mom's hair from falling out during chemotherapy. We were extremely lucky to have found success with cold capping. My mom never had to experience the heartbreaking moment when a patient first begins to lose his or her hair. She avoided having to decide which wig would make her feel like the same Janice Kelly that her loved ones recognized. In sharing this journey with my mom, I became aware of how the emotional wellbeing of cancer patients is one of the most vital sources of motivation during their fight to survive.

At the end of my mother's weekly chemotherapy treatments, she had developed a strong relationship with her nurse Mary Lou and the leaders of Artic Cold Caps that facilitated her cold capping treatment. With a resilient attitude and the assistance of her doctors and nurses, my mom was able to overcome her battle with cancer while maintaining the physical appearance and generous, uplifting character. My mom was so moved by her experience that she decided to develop her own foundation, Cure the Cure, in hopes of spreading awareness of cold capping and making it more accessible to people around the country. Her efforts working on this project illustrate how my mom approaches adversity with the intent of learning from her experiences and ultimately helping others. She is a reliable sister to seven siblings, a public servant as a former Delta airline stewardess, a devoted mom to two children, a courageous cancer survivor, and now a bold entrepreneur attempting to begin her own charity. The benevolent, kind, and unselfish character of my mother has benefitted and will continue to benefit the lives of others.

After she told me about her diagnosis, we were nearly ten minutes away from home. However, my mom wouldn't dare let the devastating news disrupt her from conducting a proper celebration of my soccer victory. We stopped at one of our favorite local ice cream shops and while she ordered two vanilla-chocolate swirls, one with sprinkles and one without, the darkness that I had so distinctly sensed only fifteen minutes before seemed to vanish entirely. Sitting side-by-side, sheltered by the lively streetlights, we enjoyed our ice cream and conversed in our usual silly custom. Suddenly I realized that, with ice cream like this and a mom like that, we would complete our journey together just fine.