

“Just for JEN”

2017 CSCGP High School Teen Essay Contest

Just for Jen

By Colin Fagan

We are in a time where public sentiment can impose a change in what is valued by society. Variables can work independently or in concert to coordinate the actions of political decision-makers, societal events and social change movements to affect our everyday lives. Those actions, events and movements can be life changing to a person diagnosed with cancer. The social and emotional support we can provide a cancer patient can defeat the stress of cancer allowing the patient to concentrate on beating cancer and being a survivor!

Throughout the world, everyday people are diagnosed with cancer. However, until cancer targets your immediate family, the stress of cancer is difficult to understand. At an early age, the word cancer was introduced into my vocabulary with my grandfather's diagnosis of lung cancer. I was unaware of the number of pills, countless doctor's appointments, sickness after chemotherapy, tattoos my grandfather received for radiation alignment or the emotional impact of my grandfather losing his hair until I was older. Cancer had taken my grandfather but the impact of the disease was unknown to me. My parents were able to shield me from many aspects of the disease and protect my childhood innocence.

Cancer struck my family again, this time it was harder for my parents to shield me from the struggles cancer brings. My Aunt Jen was excited to tell our family that she was expecting her third child. Our family was excited about the news and provided an uplift to my parents after my grandfather's passing. As I have grown older and beginning to embark on my college career, I have learned that parents put their children ahead of everything else in their world. My Aunt Jen is no different in her and my uncle's parenting philosophy. My Aunt and I have a special bond which is our love for soccer and the interest in physical activity. We could spend hours together talking about the latest soccer game or news in the soccer world. We would also share tips and tricks about different fitness trends.

Five months into her pregnancy she was complaining about terrible chest pains. Her pregnancy had been normal up to that point with an occasional episode of heart burn. This was different than normal heart burn, it was chest pain. After doing the pregnancy medical examinations, the doctors decided to perform a cat scan. To say the results were unexpected was an understatement. My Aunt Jen was diagnosed with Lymphoma five months into her pregnancy. Her concern for a normal pregnancy had just been escalated and complicated. She now had to worry about her unborn baby and her own health.

It was an emotional struggle for my Aunt Jen, her husband and our family. We were all excited about a new addition to our extended family, but the possibility of cancer taking my Aunt Jen and her unborn child was overwhelming. I did not know how to express my feelings and concerns about my Aunt being diagnosed. Would cancer take my Aunt? Would her child, my cousin, survive? What would happen to my Uncle and their kids if the worst were to happen? Would she have the new born baby but at the risk of her own life? It was difficult for me to talk to my Aunt about her cancer. I didn't know if the next time I saw her if it would be the last time I ever saw her. I realized that there was nothing I could do to make the cancer disappear but I could support her and her family through the difficult times that were ahead. I just had to help her take it one

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day at a time, help her look at the positive things in life like talking more about soccer to keep her mind off the worst possibilities that could happen.

The medical course of action that was decided on was to delivery her child two months early and to start chemotherapy soon afterwards. On June 27 my cousin Nicholas was born and three days later my Aunt began chemotherapy. My family rallied in support of my Aunt in her treatment and her premature son. My parents and family adjusted their lives to support my Aunt with day to day care throughout her treatment.

As challenging as the treatment was my Aunt had to push forward for her children. She never gave up. Within the year, our family walked together as a team in support for “Just for Jen”. Our team name was created by my Aunt for her children: Jake, Emily and Nicholas – JEN. Her walk that year was an inspiration to our whole family. Throughout the years we have continued to participate in the Lymphoma walks and raise money for Lymphoma research.

My Aunt Jen is an inspiration to me. At only being 12 years old when my Aunt was diagnosed with cancer, I did not always fully understand what was going on. What I did know was that whenever I would see my Aunt, she would always greet me with her usual loving smile. She would always ask me how I was doing and how was soccer. I knew she was struggling through one of life's biggest challenges but wanted to ease my fears by making me feel more comfortable. A very emotional time for me was seeing that my Aunt had shaved her head. This was very hard for me to understand. My parents explained to me that my Aunt wanted to control the disease and not let the disease control her. Seeing your hair fall out daily could have been very emotionally upsetting. The physical appearance of my Aunt had begun to change because of the cancer but she was still was my hero! I would look at my Aunt and constantly wonder what I could possible do to help her. My family and I did the best we could do to help my Aunt and her family. I would visit their house frequently and help watch the kids to take my Aunt and Uncle's mind off of the disease.

Cancer has opened my eyes as a young adult. Cancer has shown me that the disease does not discriminate against race, gender, age, sexuality or social class. Cancer can attack anyone. My Aunt took each day at a time during her illness. She knew that life would throw its toughest obstacles in her way and she would overcome the obstacle. She had to battle this cancer and defeat it for good but she knew she did not have to fight alone. My Aunt and I enjoy watching similar movies and our favorite is Rocky. Rocky’s quote on life is the way she was going to beat cancer with a loving family support her, including me that would be fighting with her all the way.

“Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!” – Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone)

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Today, my Aunt and her family are doing well. I continue to have a great bond with my Aunt, a bond that has grown even bigger within the past years. Cancer has taught me that a parent's love for their child has no boundaries. They will always put their children first despite any obstacles that they may face and never give up. A parent is willing to do anything for their child to succeed in life. I look at my Aunt and see a hero, who fought cancer, is raising a great family and is winning at living. I see her dedication and have applied it to my own life in my love for soccer and school. I will never give up on the goals I set for myself no matter what obstacles I may encounter along the way just as I have witnessed firsthand how my Aunt Jen has set and completed her own goals.