



2019 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

1st Place Winner

Laura Klouda

A Cascading Impact

On September 5, 2014, I sat cross-legged with my sister in the itchy grass, watching my brother and his friends follow a soccer ball like puppies, all strategy abandoned with a whistle blow. Their coach shook his head in dismay. A warm fall breeze swept voluminous clouds across the afternoon sky. Though all appeared peaceful, unease settled in my stomach. When my mom picked up her phone, a scowl forming across her brow, I knew in my gut that something was wrong.

Not twenty minutes later, we hustled into a sterile, cold, hospital atmosphere. Turquoise scrubs swarmed around us and incessant beeping punctured the low murmuring of the workers and rattling carts. I slunk silently behind my mom, overwhelmed as we wandered the labyrinth of hallways. Finally, Room 417. I peered inside, then entered hesitantly. My dad smiled when he saw me.

After some nervous chitchat, the mood turned serious. “I have something to tell you, Laura,” my dad said, looking me in the eye. “They did scans to find the ulcer, and that’s not what’s causing my problems.” My mind immediately rushed to worst-case scenarios. *Please, God, don’t let these next words be what I think they might be.* But God had other plans. And so my dad continued, “I have cancer.”

Instantly, my head was spinning. I felt hot and freezing at the same time. “You have to be strong for me. I’ll be strong for you,” my dad promised, holding me in his arms as I leaned over the side of his hospital bed to bury my face in his chest. All I could think was, *He’s going to die. My dad is going to die.* All too soon, visiting hours were over. As my mom drove my sister and I home from the hospital that night, I rolled down the passenger window and let the air blast my face from the highway. I was numb, and the wind drowned out the silence. I couldn’t speak, but the last thing I wanted was to sit and endure the silence, broken only by my sister snuffles or my mother’s deep breaths. While streets and cars and darkness flashed past, I wished the wind could blow away the terrible news as easily as it was blowing away my tears.

For years after my dad’s diagnosis, I lived in fear. Having no experience with cancer, my first thought was that my dad would die. That idea terrified me. Even after two successful surgeries, challenges kept arising: a trip to the emergency room during our family vacation, procedures to fix a mistake from a previous operation, and treatments done overseas. With every complication, my fears deepened. Yet even in his lowest of lows, my dad stayed positive. His relentless optimism influenced me just as much as his cancer, teaching me to see what good has come of this affliction. Through the struggle, my family has grown closer and learned how to comfort others also touched by cancer. Most importantly, his battle with cancer has been a channel for me to discover my interest in biology, research, and medicine.

Without my dad's cancer, I would never have found my calling into the field of oncology. In the next few years to come, I will be studying biology, working with professionals in hospitals in Philadelphia, and preparing for med school. My love for biology stemmed from my longing to understand what was happening to my dad. From a paper cut to a fatal disease, biology has the answers to "why?" and "what can we do about it?" Thankfully, many of those answers are known for my dad. The best team of doctors for his type of cancer are at hospitals right here in Philadelphia, and he has been able to go to Switzerland for specialized radiation therapy not yet offered in the States. Other cancer patients are not as fortunate. Their answers still wait, hidden for now, and I'm determined to find them.

Many things have changed in my life since that fateful fall day in eighth grade. I've grown as a person, grown closer to my family, grown in my faith, lost and gained friends, met the love of my life, delved deep into new interests and hobbies, learned to drive, worked two jobs, dealt with mental illness, figured out college, and my future plans. Cancer has affected each and every one of those things. My dad's cancer shook me to the core. It made me question everything, asking, "what's the point of this?", "what if we never get to that?", and my least favorite, "will this be the last time we ever have this experience?" I've learned how to work through those fears, focusing instead on choosing to be grateful and have joy each and every day. My dad is doing well, but his battle is far from over. As for me, I am now wrapping up my senior year, preparing to go to Drexel University to study biology on a pre-med track. I've been asked where I see myself ten years from now, and I can confidently say that I see myself completing my residency to become an oncologist so that I can study cancer and help patients just like my dad and many others. I know I will get there someday, and it is my prayer that my dad will still be here to encourage me and see me accomplish my goal of conquering cancer.