



2019 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
High School  
Teen Essay Contest

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner

## Riley Johnson

### The Rock of the Family

Cancer has a way of affecting every member of the family some way or another. Personally, I never thought that *my* own family would be afflicted by this horrible experience. But these past couple of months showed me that I was sorely mistaken.

It was the beginning of October, and I had just gotten home from school after a half-day due to the PSATs. It wasn't just post-testing tiredness that made me go to the couch and rub my temples in anxious apprehension. A week ago, my mother told me she went to the doctor to examine an abnormality on her breast, amidst the other commotion our family had recently had. My nephew was born two weeks ago and that's when I started to notice something with my mom; specifically, I noticed that she'd bought giant gauze pads. After the gauze pads came the overpowering smell of an infectious wound. That lasted for a while. My mom was not the type to say everything out in the open, and whenever I asked about the smell, she would say it was her hair, the shirt she was wearing, anything to evade telling what she knew very well. Finally, she went to the doctor and they asked for a follow-up.

My dad had stayed home from his job on Wall Street to see this doctor with mom. Mom had tossed around the “C-word” as a possibility, yet it was never fully believed. I for one thought it was benign. I heard the garage door open and they walked in. Dad went to the bathroom first; Mom asked me to join her in my grandmother’s room. That was my first clue that something was wrong. My second clue was my father’s pale face when he sat down. My mom let out a breath, then she said it. She has breast cancer, and it was at a bad stage.

An overwhelming rush of air left my body and my heart lurched. *Cancer?! I mean, I did* subconsciously know that was why the wound was open and infectious, but I had hoped it was fine. That being said, after I found out, I bawled like a baby. My feelings got so bad that I had called my brother, sister-in-law, and my boyfriend and they both came over and heard my mother’s news. My mom wanted to start treatment as soon as she could, so that she would be finished come September of next year. This meant that she would need a lot of help. I did not know what to do; my mom did everything in the house, and she was the one who kept us all sane. She was the rock. The rock of the family was about to go through a very tough part of her life, and we would all have to pick up the slack.

The end of October brought on the first of 8 chemotherapy treatments. The first one caused my mom to go through a loop; she became tired and lethargic and super-hungry. The first two days after her first rounds of chemo were her good days; she would be fine, but hungry. The next two days would be her tired, sluggish days. The rest of the week was fine. After two weeks, her hair began to fall out, so she trimmed it into a pixie cut-like mine-which lasted about a week. Watching all this, I thought about how much change happened in the course of a little under a month.

We had my aunts and uncles calling asking how she was; sometimes people made us food and offered to take us food shopping or to take me to school, even though I got my license the Saturday after Thanksgiving. My boyfriend drove me home on days my mom went to the doctors, and he would hang out with me in order to keep me happy. I was a mess; my anxious behavior got worse some days. I would get into arguments with my dad and grandmother over how to do simple things, like laundry. They would be so annoying sometimes, like they knew what was best for mom, when only she knew. I absorbed myself in schoolwork. There was no sense of normalcy.

Christmas time was a small dinner. Mom now had no hair. But her head could rock the Amber Rose look well. She was still Mom; sometimes she'd ask me if I were nervous around her without hair. I was only nervous about what other ignorant people would say. If they said *anything*, I would retaliate. That's *my* mother. You never talk about my family. I had caught her upset one time and Connor, my boyfriend, asked her what was wrong. She said she didn't feel like herself; she lost weight, but she wasn't skeletal like the stereotypical cancer patients I saw on TV or read about in books. I told her she was the same. Her eyes still looked out from her face, which was now the face of a warrior.

I now did laundry and set the table. I was never expected to do much when I was younger; I had a rough infancy-born with one lung-and I was semi-coddled. But I actually enjoyed doing my laundry and setting the table and vacuuming and driving. It gave a sense of a normal family life, which I had forgotten. Sometimes I wondered if cancer would be our new normal. God, I hope not.

Around February, she finished her second round of chemo. This only caused her to have aching joints. When she was done, there was nothing in the space where her breast had been.

But, luckily, unlike from October to December, there was no smell of flesh that had lysed and infected. Around the first week of March, Mom and Dad returned to the doctor. It was time for the post-chemo PET scan, which would determine the next course of action. Most likely it would be removal of the tumor and reconstruction, then radiation and then pills.

I got into the car with them, and Mom let out a breath. Again-like the first time-my heart lurched. Then she said it. She was cancer-free. Tears welled in my eyes and I covered my choking cry of ecstasy. The next course of action would be the pills to kill dormant cells and then-if need be-removal and reconstruction and then radiation. Mom's hair is coming back and now she has a cancer-killing shot every other Monday. The normalcy of my life before cancer slowly returned, and now it is almost fine again.

Cancer taught me that I can be fine in a crisis, and that I can handle whatever life throws at me. I now know my mother is fine, and now I, too, am fine. Cancer didn't break my family. It only fueled our fight.