



2019 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Emma Craven

Connection

8 people, 7 types, 6 white blood cells, 5 hospital visits, 4 deaths, 3 good-byes, 2 relapses, 1 cause, *cancer*. The definition of cancer is the uncontrolled growth of harmful cells, however that simple definition does not define the true meanings of the term cancer. All the numbers I listed above could never add up to the amount of emotional damage caused by one single word, cancer.

My first true connection with cancer began when I was seven years old. This first event would be the start of the seemingly endless chain of cancer related happenings in my life. One night was not like the others, my parents were going out for the night. They said they were heading to a party, black tie formal. I was confused then, *why were they going out? Where were they going? Why couldn't I come along? Why didn't I believe them?* I knew my parents were being vague, but I did not dwell on it then. However, as the end of the night fell, I began to realize why they said so little. After they left, the night continued as expected, then the babysitters left, my parents came home, they took off their coats and I headed upstairs to get

ready for bed. However I did not get too far until they called my back downstairs. I was confused as they began to explain,

“Listen,” my father stated quietly, “We didn’t really go to a party tonight, we went to a funeral.”

I was surprised, *who for?* I’d assumed it was someone only my parents knew since I did not attend. However my father then continued and solemnly said that my grandfather had passed away of stage four colon cancer. All I remember from the rest of that night was crying profusely. I did not understand what was happening? *What does all this even mean? How could someone I shared brownies with just one month ago be physically gone from this planet? The person that I gifted, the clay sunflower that I’d made in art class, be gone, and never see that sunflower again?* I had so many different emotions, I was shocked, upset, and mad. *Why couldn’t I go to the funeral? Why didn’t I get to say a formal good-bye?*

Even though I grieved for a short time since I did not fully understand the situation at the time. The ties I created with my grandfather were never cut. I believe everything happens for a reason and things happen to you in order for you to learn something important. In order to cope with the loss, I took the large manila folder, which were used to prevent cheating on tests in grade school. I decided to decorate the folder with “the eyes of my grandfather” on the inside. I viewed the eyes that I had drawn as a representation of the fact that, even though my grandfather will never genuinely see me graduate, he will *always* be there in spirit to guide and encourage me through my years of education and the years thereafter.

Even though my grandfather, like many other members of my family, had passed away from cancer, other members of my family have survived. My grandmother is a survivor of colon cancer, my grandfather overcame skin cancer, and even though she relapsed twice, my aunt recently won her battle with breast cancer. The most important lesson to take away from this experience is the act of overcoming. No matter the outcome that my relatives faced, they *never* stopped being strong and resilient, they are nothing short of warriors. Is it because of this people that I have learned to maintain a positive attitude and never let anything keep me from doing what I am meant to do.

Earlier, I had mentioned the fact that I'd given a clay sunflower that I had made in art class to my grandfather about a month before he passed away. At that moment, I had thought nothing of it, I only deemed it a mere gift until I had a revelation about the sunflower a few weeks ago.

My grandmother, Sandy, was an extremely wonderful women. She was one of the calmest and composed people I had ever met. For many years she had horrible and debilitating back pain. At her second surgery to aid in easing her pain, the doctors found a malignant tumor in her back. They diagnosed the tumor as ovarian cancer. My grandmother life still continued normally. We would visit her in Jersey from time to time, sometimes in the hospital, but those were minimal. She had been doing wonderful. Every time we went to see her she looked beautiful with her hair done and her nails painted. When we went to meet with them my grandfather sometimes spoke quietly about her condition to my parents. I'd only ever heard a few things,

"The chemo is working great."

“Her white blood cell count was at six last week...”

“She really hanging in there.”

Of course some of the comments were negative, but having a positive attitude, I assumed she was doing fine at the time.

The next time we visited their house, she was bedridden, it had me worried, but I knew she was strong. At our next visit she was up, sitting, but up, talking, laughing, and having fun nonetheless. However looks can be deceiving. My grandmother passed away on February 14th, 2019. A day which symbolizes love, now symbolized loss. When she received her diagnosis I knew I had to be ready and prepared to hear words that I never wanted to hear. However, no medication, treatment, therapy, not *one* thing can prepare you hear that news. I kept my composure in front of my father when he had told me, for his sake, since she was his mother. In fact, I was truly at peace with the fact that she is now not suffering any longer and watching over us just like my grandfather is. Though, I soon as my father left I cried for an hour. Being older now, I began to understand the full gravity of the situation. Of course it still hurts, however, I am at peace with her passing and attend her funeral as well. We called it a celebration of her life, considering her life was for sure one to celebrate. This event was a catalyst in helping my realize something amazing about that sunflower. I had known a great deal about my grandmother, but something I did not know was that she adored sunflowers. At her “funeral” the room was filled with them, they are a true symbol of her bright and caring nature. Yet, they also meant something even more. As I was cleaning room a few weeks ago, I noticed that on the top of my small television there was a clay sunflower being used as a paper weight. At this moment, I

remembered that I had actually made two sunflowers in that art class many years prior. One for me and one for my grandfather. At first I thought that it was just coincidence that I'd seen it, but then it hit me. *Where had I seen this recently? Who else likes sunflowers? My grandmother!* From that moment on did not take those sunflowers as a simple coincidence. Instead, I have chosen to take these beautiful flowers as a symbol of connection now shared between *both* grandparents and I.

I did not want the connection to just cease there however. So, I decided to buy a bracelet with each pearl representing each type of cancer. This bracelet, which always stays connected in a circle around my wrist, represents the infinite and everlasting bond that I will always have between me and every single one of my relatives that have been affected by cancer.