



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

1st Place Winner

Kate VanBilliard

From A Word To A Reality

That night I cried. I cried hard and I didn't stop because I was shocked, I was confused, and I was sad, but I was afraid most of all. Fear of an unknown terror fueled the streams of tears because I thought my mom would die and there was nothing I could do about it.

Cancer. To this day, the word makes my insides shudder. It's an ugly word, a horrid word, a terrifying word, and a word that to seven-year-old me meant only one thing: death. At that age, "cancer" was only a scary, distant concept to me. I didn't understand what it meant for someone to have cancer. All I knew was that cancer was the reason I had never known my maternal grandparents and that when someone got cancer they died. Everything changed that night at the dinner table because cancer was no longer just a scary word. It was a reality.

The sky was dark that evening and my family had already finished dinner, but my dad called my little sister and me back to the table to talk. At first, I didn't think much of it. The day had been ordinary and I was happy, but then he said the word and my heart stopped. Younger me didn't know how to react when he asked us if we knew what cancer was and told us that our mom had a kind of it called breast cancer. All I could think of was the fact that people in my mom's family *died* of cancer. In my mind, my mom was going to die. That's why I cried so hard that night in my room. Later, my dad came in to comfort me and reassure me that we still had hope, but I couldn't help but be afraid.

The next few months were some of the worst in my life. Of course, I was too young to really understand the gravity of what was happening, but I still felt all the misery that came with it. My parents were always running to and from the hospital and my mom got increasingly tired and sick. She would lay on the couch for hours and she couldn't do a lot of the things she used to do anymore. My sister and I were asked to help around the house more and our family schedule quickly became hectic. I can still remember the day my dad shaved my mom's head and the time we went on a family shopping trip to find a wig. One of the scariest moments for me was the day my mom fell. She was in the bathroom and I came to see what had happened. When I got there, I found her sitting on the floor. Her voice was weak when she asked me to call my dad. I was confused, but I got the phone and shakily dialed as she told me which buttons to press. Luckily, my dad got home quickly and took her to the hospital. Throughout all of it, my mom was strong and fought hard. I knew she was worried, but I never saw her lose hope.

With the help of countless doctors, my mom did eventually get better, but I was changed by the cancer in ways that I didn't realize at the time, and the fear lingered on long after the disease had left. Most of all, worry began to creep into all my thoughts, following me

everywhere I went. Throughout elementary school, every arm pain was a heart attack, every headache was a brain tumor, and I contracted almost every sickness I had ever heard of. Some nights, I would wake my parents up in a panic because of something that I thought was wrong with me. The cancer had been my first real encounter with the idea of death, and it had tainted my youthfully carefree view of reality. Eventually, that feeling faded to a point where I could live without constant fear, but I still experience smaller bouts of worry today.

Even in all of the trauma that came from the cancer, the thing that strikes me most about the whole experience is the kindness of others. Even in simple ways, people really made a difference in my life that year. When my mom stayed at the hospital, a friend from my dad's work came to watch us all day on short notice. At the time, I only thought of all the fun we had making a yarn spider web and decorating the colorful "Welcome Home" sign for my mom, but now I know that the friend had her own busy life to take care of and had to sacrifice a lot of time for us. Countless people that I didn't even know cooked meals for us and brought them to the house for months. As Christmas approached that year, my parents sat down with my sister and me and explained that we just couldn't afford a lot of gifts with everything that was going on. I understood what they meant, but that didn't take away from the disappointment I felt. However, when Christmas Day came, the carpet under our tree was bursting with glistening presents of all shapes and sizes. My parents had sacrificed some money so that we could have something to open, but the rest of the overflow had come from my mom's co-workers and other people that my parents knew. People I had never met made my holiday better than I could have expected or imagined it. Even in daily struggles, we were blessed with supportive people. For example, one of my friend's moms volunteered to watch my sister and me and take my sister to kindergarten

whenever my mom had an appointment. That is just a sample of the kindness from others that still overwhelms me when I think about it.

Overall, my mom's breast cancer was a horrible experience that tainted my childhood and changed the way I saw my world, but even something as traumatic as cancer went away with time. My mom has now been cancer-free for almost ten years and I am thankful for every minute that she is still in my life. I was young when it happened, so the memories are a little hazy, but the thing that surprises me is what I still remember most about that time. While images of my mom on the bathroom floor, the wig sitting on the shelf, and the breathing measurer are still burned into my brain, those aren't the feelings that last. The longer I reflect on it, the more I think of Christmas, Mrs. A, Mrs. M, the way our financial needs were provided for, and the way my parents loved and encouraged each other through it all. In the end, my mom's sickness changed cancer from a terrifying word to a dreadful reality in my life, but it also showed me true community and showed me that even in the heaviest darkest, there's light to see if I just look hard enough.