



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest
2nd Place Winner

Anna Shields

Cancer Conqueror

I am a cancer survivor. This sounds very odd for me to say considering I am only sixteen years old. However, it is true. My cancer journey has shaped me into the person I am today. Even though I was diagnosed when I was only two years old and do not remember too much, talking about it with my family and seeing pictures gives me an understanding of the pain, suffering, and battle I experienced. I was not the only one fighting cancer. Everyone I love experienced the toughest battle: witnessing it. My parents and three siblings, and my extended family all played an important role in my journey to survival.

It was July Fourth weekend in 2006 when I was two and half years old. At this time, my siblings were five years old, three and a half years old, and three months old. I was not feeling well and was definitely not having fun, even while spending days at the shore in Wildwood, New

Jersey. I always loved the beach! My mom just knew something was not right. When we got home from vacation, my mom took me to the doctors. When I was being examined, the nurse practitioner, Nancy Roe, realized that I appeared very pale and decided to take a quick blood test. My hemoglobin (healthy red blood cells) was alarmingly low, so we were told to go to CHOP immediately for further evaluation. The doctor said it was possibly cancer, and my mom describes the feeling of hearing that horrific word as being “punched in the gut”. She immediately called my dad at work and they had to scramble to figure out who was going to take care of my three siblings so that they could pay attention to me and my care. An hour later, we were at CHOP, and my journey with cancer began.

I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL). My dad claims that hearing his daughter has cancer was the worst possible news a parent could ever hear. After being diagnosed, my parents and I spent the next several weeks in the hospital for my initial treatment of chemotherapy. My chemotherapy treatment lasted over two and half years and I received various medicines every day. The side effects caused extreme physical/emotional challenges. I lost all of my hair and experienced mood swings, an incredible appetite, and tremendous swelling due to the steroids. My treatment intensified during the holiday season which resulted in my spending Christmas Day in the hospital to receive a blood transfusion. To put my condition simply, I was a very sick little girl. My dad describes feeling “helpless” because he could not do anything to protect me from the disease. My mom put her successful career as an accountant on hold so she could focus entirely on my care.

I remember many small but important things about my journey. I remember very distinctly that I was addicted to eating, specifically mozzarella sticks and creamed spinach, which happen to be my favorite foods today. I also remember being obsessed with the movies

Madagascar, *Matilda*, and *Because of Winn-Dixie* and watching them on repeat while in the hospital. I remember being with my mom all of the time and having to be content with getting shots (even though I cried mostly every time). Lastly, I remember always receiving gifts such as my favorite stuffed bear princess that sang “From a Distance” by Bette Midler.

Because I was so little, I interviewed my two older sisters to hear what they remember and how my experience impacted them. My oldest sister, Rachel, who was five at the time, remembers many things. She remembers spending days on end at different houses such as my Aunt Jeanie’s and my Grandma Millie’s. She remembers getting picked up from daycare by my Grandma instead of my parents the day we found out the devastating news. She said she felt very confused because it was so unusual and random. She also remembers many people getting her gifts to make her feel happy and loved, specifically my Aunt Jeanie buying her makeup. She remembers seeing me eating a waffle at 9pm and asking my dad if she could have one too. He said no. Lastly, she remembers me and my mom leaving on Christmas Day to go to the hospital after opening presents. My other sister, Bernadette, who was three at the time, remembers how my parents spoiled me, my crying a lot, and not seeing me often because I was at the hospital. She also remembers calling me a boy because I had no hair. However, Bernadette thinks that the reason I am so tough today is because I had cancer.

Cancer has afflicted others in my family, not just me. I will never forget when my dad called my siblings and me downstairs and told us that my mom had breast cancer in 2017. I was very confused, scared, and in shock when I found out the news. I truly understood what others were feeling when they found out about my diagnosis. Thankfully, my mom had a lumpectomy, received radiation, and is now cancer-free. Along with my mom, my mom’s brother, my Uncle Dave, is also a cancer survivor. My dad’s brother, my Uncle Eddie, is currently battling

Lymphoma. Fortunately, his prognosis is very good. Clearly, cancer has affected me in many ways from experiencing it to witnessing it.

My experience with Leukemia does not define me. Yes, I am a cancer survivor, but that is only a part of who I am. I am a strong, fearless, and powerful girl. Simply seeing the scar on my chest from where my port was, reminds me that there is hope for everyone who is suffering with cancer. I am very blessed and thankful to be treated at one of the leading pediatric cancer hospitals in the world - CHOP. Knowing that everyday cancer research, cures, and discoveries are in progress, I am motivated to help cancer-related causes. I participated in clinical trials and am still part of survivorship studies at CHOP. In the past, I walked in the Parkway Run/Walk in Philadelphia. I participate in THON at my high school. I came to the realization that cancer should not be related to death and suffering. Instead, my experience represents triumph over cancer and how to live every day to the fullest. Now, I am a straight A student, I play high school soccer and lacrosse, and I am an active participant in my school community. Thus, I stand corrected: I am not just a cancer survivor. I am a Cancer Conqueror.