



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
Middle School
Teen Essay Contest

2nd Place Winner

Gabriela Fernandez

True Beauty

Cancer was inevitably brought into my life at a very young age. Though my memories of those times are vague, I know that it was a sorrowful and challenging time in our household. My mother was diagnosed with stage one breast cancer when I was around four. She experienced many traumas, near-death experiences, embarrassment, and she was full of despair, yet she was fierce and held her chin up high. Cancer had crawled in her and my family's life at the worst time, taking her well-being and happiness, trapping us a web of anxiousness and misery. My mother didn't let it take everything away from us; instead, she fought hard every day until she finally beat it. Through its hardships, cancer has brought our family together in various ways making learning experiences that taught us to appreciate our lives. It helped define what beauty really is and it showed us that having support makes anything one-step closer to recovery.

Cancer kills approximately 600,000 people each year - about 43,000 are from breast cancer. When my mother heard the sudden news, she couldn't believe it - suddenly her world changed. After all, my sister was only a couple months old, before the awful news, times were hopeful, happy, and life was full. After the doctor said the word cancer, my mom thought about my sister and me. Was she going to see us grow up? Because when you hear a doctor telling you that you have cancer, you see death - you also see baldness, sickness,

you see pain, discomfort, ribbons, goodbyes, but above all, you see death. Not only going through that concern, but my mom was also growing more and more self-conscious, losing her self-esteem. She hated looking at herself in the mirror and was constantly feeling insecure. Despite everything, my mother was strong by having faith and she continued to work to help provide for our family. She showed us true beauty, a beauty that goes beyond the physical. She showed us true beauty in her compassion, strength, resiliency, and selflessness.

My memories of my sick mother are vague; I remember feeling full of worries. My entire life I've experienced many concerns, I've worried about things normal 14-year-olds would worry about, from homework to family and to whether my hair was out of place - but this was different. As oblivious and unaware as I was, I always knew that something awful was happening. The clearest memory I have of this terrible time was my dad shaving my mom's hair. She was in the bathroom with her chin to her chest as my dad ran a razor through her hair. I saw her crying, and as a child, the worst thing imaginable was to witness my mother being in pain; tears ran through my face because I knew that she shouldn't be crying, she shouldn't be going through this. My mom deserved to be happy and always smile. Now, I understand her tears; she was scared for herself but mostly for us, she didn't want us to lose a mother at a young age as she did. My entire family helped us out whenever we needed it; they were always there for us. They supported us in every way and always reminded my mother to never give up or lose hope. They helped convince my mother that cancer didn't define her - that with or without it, my mom is the same loving and considerate person.

My mother is the strongest person I know, not physically, but to me, in every other way, she is stronger than anyone else. She dealt with cancer well; she continued to work, she stayed strong for me and her family, and she learned to surpass the small things that had a big impact on her view of herself. Cancer affected not only my mom but also my entire family. When one family member gets a disease as big as cancer, it's as if everyone also gets it because it's so crippling and sorrowful. Knowing that a large percent of my mother's side of the family all have had cancer also created a sense of tension for my sister and I. However, together we were able to see the silver lining. We refused to allow cancer to dictate our lives and we learned to overcome the horrors of cancer by love, support, strength, and dignity.