



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
Middle School
Teen Essay Contest
3rd Place Winner

Anne Pallozzi

Living Life Half Full

Many people would never expect to have cancer in their family, even just once, but three times? That's not even possible, right? Actually, it is. Sadly, my family has experienced this. If you look at us, you wouldn't be able to tell how much we've been through. As you get closer, though, you can see it. The scars are there, if you know what to look for. You might think that my family is sad, gloomy, and distant after all we've been through. That's actually not the case at all. If anything, cancer has brought my family closer together and taught us to appreciate life.

It all started when my brother was a baby and I was only three. My brother's pediatrician was concerned with what my mom thought was just a normal "baby pot belly", so he ordered blood tests. The results showed something was wrong. After many more tests, my mother sat in a room at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) waiting anxiously to hear the results. The doctors came in and said the words every mother prays they never have to hear: "We are sorry, but we think your son has cancer." My brother was diagnosed with Hepatoblastoma. He had to do six rounds of chemotherapy and had a big surgery to remove his tumor. It was hard, but my family got through it.

In 2016, things were starting to look up. My brother had just passed the 5 year mark, making him 'cured!' Just before my brother was about to start 2nd grade, he got what we thought

was a bad stomach bug, except that it lasted weeks. This time, his pediatrician wasn't able to tell what was wrong. My mom scheduled an appointment with CHOP. My brother went in on a Thursday morning. Suddenly, he was rushed into surgery and I wasn't allowed to see him. My mother and father got horrible news: my brother had cancer again. He was diagnosed with Medulloblastoma. Strangely, his cancers were unrelated. When I was finally allowed to see him, I saw my brother, who had once been so spunky and happy, now laying in a hospital bed with a drain in his head and multiple IV drips. It was hard to see him like that! After his surgery, he needed thirty days of radiation and nine rounds of chemotherapy. It was hard, even more than the last time, but we pushed through it again.

Soon, my brother got his Make-a-Wish trip. It was the most magical trip I had ever been on. Things were amazing and my family was happy. Just over a year after my brother had completed his treatments, my mom got a new doctor. He wanted to run tests on something her old doctor told her not to worry about. When the results came back, my mom got the unexpected news that she had cancer - stage 4 adenocarcinoma. This was definitely the hardest diagnosis. My mom had to do twelve cycles of chemo. The side effects were so bad that my mom was basically stuck in bed for days. Still we were able to have fun around that. My parents worked hard to make life as good as possible during this really scary time. Chemo ended in June, and we spent our summer enjoying life as much as we could. Summer ended too soon and we prepared for my mom's surgery. Her surgery was many hours long and they removed multiple organs. At the hospital, my mom got a serious postoperative infection. She had to stay 2 extra weeks and missed our first day of school. It was hard for everyone. Thankfully, the doctor got all the cancer, and we are hopeful that my mom will beat the odds and stay cancer free.

Through all of this, we found great support organizations, including Gilda's Club, that helped us a lot. We participated in many fun programs and met people in similar situations to us. I made many friends who I still see regularly. We found support when we needed it and fun things to help us forget about cancer for a little while.

Even after all that we have experienced, my family is still happy and very close together. We have learned to see the light at the end of the tunnel and we look at the glass half full, rather than half empty. We don't take anything for granted and we truly enjoy every good moment we have.