



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

3rd Place Winner

Layne Frearson

Only Up From Here

“Mom has cancer.” Little did I know how much those three words would shatter my world and everything I knew completely. Even before I was born, cancer was going to be a part of my life. My Dad was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma on April 8, 2002. Fifteen days later, I was born on April 23rd. My dad endured six months of chemotherapy treatment starting 5 days before I was born, and radiation. Thankfully, the cancer has been gone ever since. My mom was so relieved, and her little girl would have a normal, healthy upbringing. Little did we know, my dad having cancer was only a small test for what was to come.

Flash-forward, the end of my fourth grade school year. I just turned 10 and finished another fun season of softball, and the anticipation of summer was in the air. But this summer was going to be very different. My dad sat us all down with my mom and said the heartbreaking words, “mom has colon cancer.” Confused was an understatement. How could a healthy, 36 year old mother get stage three colon cancer? What did my Mom do to deserve this? However, being 10 years old, I still believed almost everything my parents said, how my mom was going to go through treatment and beat this nasty cancer, and life would go on as normal. For a while, everything did go pretty well. By December of 2012, there were no signs of cancer, and it was the best Christmas present. Although many people mean well, it was nice to finally not have people coming

up to me in church asking me about my mom, or constantly having strangers in the house.

September of seventh grade rolls around and cancer was about the last thing on my mind, until I heard the dreaded words, "Mom's cancer is back in her lymph nodes." Tears welling up in my eyes, I calmly went up to my room and cried into my pillow, hiding that I was terrified. All I could feel was a wave of sadness, confusion, and anger. Why in the world is this happening again? And why to my innocent mom? Cancer, chemo, radiation, clinical trials, and heartache all became the norm. Every other week, my mom would get her chemo treatments and other families would drive me to my softball practice/games, dinner was fendng for yourself, and random people were in and out of the house all the time, and for an introvert like me, it drove me crazy. Hearing people's unwanted advice, like how certain products, or eating certain meats was causing my mom's cancer was also extremely insulting.

I never felt so alone and hopeless in my life. All of my "friends" at school had seemingly perfect lives, with healthy parents that loved and spoiled them always, and I felt so jealous. How was I ever to talk about my mom's cancer, when the worst thing in my friends lives was their dog being sick, or getting a "B" on the math test. School was becoming a real struggle for me, I was starting to fail tests, forget homework, and my grades were slipping tremendously. My dad saw how much I was struggling, and suggested going to a cancer support group. At first, I thought that was pointless, but my dad pretty much forced me to just try the first meeting at Gilda's Club, I reluctantly went, but I am so glad I did. I started going to Gilda's club regularly that October and loved it, and became the highlight of my week. Meetings consisted of a small room upstairs in an older house, with a few other kids the same age as me, and talking about the struggles we faced having parents that were slowly dying of this horrific disease. Shannon, the group leader, was so understanding and sweet, and was so sympathetic towards all of us, all while she was going through the same thing with her mom. It was an eye opening experience for me to meet other kids going through the same exact hopelessness as I was. After a few meetings, I gave Gilda's Club my own nickname, "the unfortunates" because all of us had difficult situations, which some adults can't even handle. The mini pillow I made at "the unfortunates," with all of the emotions that cancer has made me feel is still on my desk today. From going to "the unfortunates," it gave me a safe space to talk about how I truly felt about all the craziness in my life without being judged, or people not understanding, and learning that it's ok to not be ok.

After my mom's cancer coming back in seventh grade, it never really left. She went through months of brutal chemotherapy and pills to try to keep the cancer away, that painfully made her hands and feet bleed, but she kept fighting. All along her battle, she said she wouldn't be going through all of these excruciating treatments if it wasn't for us. The spring of 10th grade my mom developed a vicious cough from cancer pushing against her lungs, which was the start of my denial that she was really dying.

The start of summer 2018 was hell, and the ending couldn't have been any worse. As summer progressed, my mom's condition worsened by the day, having multiple surgeries including one for her collapsed lung. I learned how to take care of my brothers

and myself, fairly quickly from my parents constantly staying overnight at the hospital. At work, I would hear sirens, and couldn't help but worry if my mom was ok. I was afraid to go to bed, what if my mom wouldn't wake up? All throughout the night, I could hear her coughing trying to gasp for air, and everything she ate couldn't hold in her stomach. Towards the end of August, my dad started carrying her to help her walk, and she rarely moved from the couch since the pain was so severe. Despite all of her pain and suffering, she wasn't going to give up like this. At the end of August, she decided to do four more chemo treatments, symbolizing one treatment each for my brothers, dad, and myself.

The first day of junior year was dreadful, I put on a happy face for everybody and from the surface you would have never guessed that my mom only had days to live. None of my teachers or friends knew my mom was dying. All I could think about was if I should even be at school, since my mom's days were so numbered. At the end of the first week of school on Friday, we had our last family meeting. My dad said "mom isn't going to make it," and explained how she is going on hospice and has about two weeks left to live. Everything was surreal, I just remember sobbing, thinking this really can't be happening. A part of me still grasped to the hopes of a miracle clinical trial saving her. On Saturday night, we had everyone in our extended family over, basically to say last goodbyes. Despite being in excruciating pain from cancer all over her body, she was alert the whole time and ate dinner with everyone. From the outside, you would've never guessed she was going to die the next day. Sunday afternoon, thinking my mom still had time with us, I kissed her and told her I loved her, and left for the gym, and that was the last time I saw her alive. My family friends picked me up from the gym, knowing that she passed away while I was there, but didn't say anything. When we pulled up into the driveway, my dad walked out crying and I knew immediately what happened, and fell to the ground sobbing.

A year and a half later, not a day goes by that I don't think about my mom. I know my mom is watching over me in heaven, and is so proud of me. Yes, it's really hard going prom dress shopping without my mom, and going to college tours and seeing people with both of their parents happy. Not having my mom here for my upcoming senior prom and graduation, or having her advice for what college or major I should pick, is really tough. To this day, I still have a hard time talking to my friends about my cancer experience, simply because none of them understand. Hearing complaints about how their mom took away their phone, or won't buy them the jeans they want is very bothersome. However, I always remember Gilda's Club, how there are people in the same situation as me, feeling the same grief as me, and I will never be alone in this. Thank you Gilda's Club for giving me a safe place to talk about how I *really* feel, and giving me a whole new perspective on life:)