



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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Scared Today, Strong Tomorrow

When you hear someone say the word “cancer” you feel so many things. Part of you feels devastated that anybody is sick enough that they need chemicals strong enough to kill evil cells that take over their body and to be cut open on a table because that’s the only realistic way to remove a tumor. Another part of you is angry that there’s no cure and that you can’t do anything to help someone who’s sick besides tell them you’re there to help, cook meals for them after an exhausting, painful surgery or drop off comforting items on their porch like blankets and pillows to ease the pain. The final part of you is just numb. You feel helpless and scared like a five year old who’s stuck on the monkey bars and can’t move. You feel like no matter what you do, nothing will change and that you will feel this scared forever. Maybe not everyone feels these exact emotions after a cancer diagnosis, but I surely felt them all with my mom’s cancer diagnosis. In September of my sophomore year of high school and January of my junior year, my mom was diagnosed with colon cancer. Although the diagnosis wasn’t necessarily “unexpected”

because of her symptoms, nothing truly prepared me for my heart sinking and stomach tying in knots when I was told your mom had cancer.

I always knew my mom was strong enough to fight. What I didn't know, as you don't usually, is if everything would be okay. I didn't know if my mom would survive, and didn't know how I would get through it. The pain of anyone you care about being diagnosed with cancer is unlike any other pain. It's a numb pain, the kind you only feel when you are so overcome with emotion that you don't really feel anything at all. Then you feel sad, which comes and goes in waves like sadness usually does, and you feel scared. You're scared to lose someone you love, and you're scared that you won't be able to handle it if they die. Again, this feeling comes and goes in waves. But the feeling that never really goes away is the regret. It's weird regretting something that isn't your fault, but the feeling's constantly there. You regret that you can't do more to help, even when doing everything you can, and you regret that the people you lean on for help might think less of you for not being able to handle it on your own. These are all normal feelings, and if I could talk to someone my age dealing with the same thing, I would make sure that they understand that it's okay to feel these things, and it's okay to not want to feel them, but that they need to let them happen, because if they don't, the emotions will eventually burst out like a volcano.

My mom was diagnosed with cancer twice, once in September of my sophomore year and again in January of my junior year of high school. What I learned through the two diagnoses is that it never gets easier. You learn how to cope, but the emotions are always there, sometimes very present and sometimes only lurking in the back of your head. The hardest part is watching your mom have chemotherapy infused into her body, making her sicker after each appointment. Although I knew she was strong, it was terrifying watching her go through treatments and

wondering how successful they would be. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that maybe treatment would fail, and that if I did lose her, I would never be okay.

We ended up being one of the lucky patient families. After an invasive surgery cutting into her colon and removing a tumor the size of a human fist and twelve chemotherapy treatments, she was cleared to live her life again. The second diagnosis only led to a surgery to remove the cancer and routine scans every two months. However, not every family is as lucky as mine. Some families fight cancer for years and still lose, and some people are diagnosed with cancer so aggressive that it only takes a couple of months for it to poison their entire body and kill them. Although no cancer diagnosis is taken lightly, it is important to remember that not everyone dies from cancer. So many people are now being diagnosed with aggressive cancers and still surviving thanks to modern medicine, which my family is so thankful for.

If I could give one message to another teenager trying to cope with a family member's cancer diagnosis, it would be, "Let yourself feel. Let yourself be sad, numb and scared. Let yourself feel as helpless as you need, but don't stay stuck in that feeling. Remember that no matter what happens, there are better days ahead and someday you are going to look back at your younger self and chuckle at the idea that they thought that nothing would turn out okay." Although my mom's cancer diagnosis was by far the hardest thing I've ever been through, I wouldn't be the person I am today without going through that experience, and am thankful for everything I learned from it.

Ultimately, without my mom's cancer diagnosis, I would be nowhere near as strong as I am today, and wouldn't truly understand how blessed I am to be living with two now completely healthy parents, a goofy younger sister and adorable dog. I've grown so much stronger and more grateful for the "little things" through this experience that I wouldn't change it for a thing. So to

my younger self and anyone else in the same place as I was last year, hang in there. Everything will turn out alright in the end and you will come out so much stronger and proud of yourself for not giving up on whoever was diagnosed, even when it felt like the only option.