



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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The Storm

Where does one start with such a tragic event. There is only one place to start, and that is the earliest thing I remember. Spring Break, images of sunny beaches, pool parties, hanging with friends, flood the mind. It was a normal spring break to me too, a 12-year-old going to Disney with cousins and family. It was normal until the ride home when my father, suddenly became seriously ill and in excruciating pain, which would worry anybody, but in his case, already suffering from certain blood diseases such as MDS and other three letter acronyms I cannot remember, it was more serious. MDS was a form of pre-leukemia but it was under control after many hospital visits and several doctors all a phone call away. However, being away from his doctors at Penn did not comfort us one bit. We were forced to stop at a small hospital in South Carolina. Then he was transferred to a major hospital in South Carolina, MUSC where he had to undergo surgery on his arm since there was compartment syndrome. He was completely incapacitated and under a lot of pain. I all the while was trying to avoid the acknowledgement my dad may not make it. I felt, if I cried, it would only make it real. I tried to focus on March Madness where Villanova, was on a run, and who I had winning it in my bracket. My dad and I went and saw every home game together, and him not being able to watch them with me, left a gaping hole in my heart, and I did not know if it would ever be filled again. I remained in South Caroline for several days, and saw my dad only a few times, and when I saw him, he was hooked onto breathing tubes and was unable to even recognize me or acknowledge my presence. Every second that I saw him, and he wasn't his usual, overly clean self, felt like a stake being driven into my heart. A few days later of constant aid from MUSC doctors they decided he needed to be transferred to Penn. He was finally stabilized enough to be transported by plane to Penn, after several surgeries and transfusions. But to this day, due to the surgeries, he is unable to move his

hand completely. However, thanks to MUSC, I still have a dad. This to me, was a storm, but this was just the storm front and the worst was to come.

While my dad, remained in South Carolina, I was being driven home by an uncle. I arrived home, and after missing several days of school, finally returned. My dad was flown home later. Friends asked how I was holding up and I of course kept a brave face on, even in front of my family. I felt, I needed to be strong for them, and become the man of the house overnight. I became quieter in class and expressed less emotions due to the ones I was bottling up inside of me. When he was flown home, he became more unstable and was placed in the ICU, on April 4, 2016 and as many in the Philadelphia area know, this was the day that Villanova won the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship. I watched the whole game with my father, sitting at his side while he lays there unable to grasp the history that is unfolding and what we have wanted since he started taking me to games when I was 5 years old. They won on a buzzer beater and I was filled with so much stress and anxiety that suddenly turned to happiness and joy. This was a nice escape from the dark rooms of the ICU, reeking of misfortune. But in the coming year of many hospital visits, sleepover at friends' houses, and trays of baked ziti from friends, he was placed into a normal hospital room and the storm was still pushing. He still had a very weakened immune system with low white blood cell counts and other medical terms which I again, am not sure on. We needed to wear gowns, masks, and gloves to see him. At least he was able to talk and interact with us. There were some trips home shot down by a raised temperature and my mother was the hero in this tragedy working with the doctors. She took care of me and my sister all the while monitoring my dad when he was home and visiting him constantly when he was not. She learned how to work the IV for home and was absolutely killing her job at being super mom. I began to think the sky was beginning to clear but I was wrong; he was diagnosed with Leukemia, a form of cancer originating in the blood.

For those who know the feeling of a family member being diagnosed with cancer, it is immeasurable to any other experience. You feel completely lost and you want to have hope, but especially for me, I was scared. I did not know what this truly meant, and now nearing 13 years old, I was not ready to lose my dad. With reassurances from family and friends who always repeatedly said, "He will be fine, you all will get through this" I felt comforted but deep inside I felt these were empty statements, since how could they know. My dad, with near to no immune system strength was almost always in the hospital. To see him I had to get into my usual suit of monotone yellow smocks and masks. It was impossible to be happy or content during this time. With some good news, came equally bad news. "The cancer is treatable, and he should be ok, but chemotherapy and many of the drugs will be a very tough and excruciating journey." I just wanted the constant struggle to end. I wanted my life back, and I wanted my dad to take my fishing, come to my lacrosse games, and get frustrated when I scratch the wall or hit the car by accident. But I did not know if this would ever happen. He eventually received a bone marrow transplant from his sister, my aunt, a compatible donor. After a very tough fight and journey to recovery with help from many doctors at Penn, my mother, my dad persevered and was declared cancer free. There was a brief period where everything was calmer, and it seemed as if everything that happened was in the past. The storm seemed to be over, but as I now know, we were only in the eye, and a second wave of problems was going to arise.

My dad received a bone marrow donation which caused his whole immune system and blood cells to be changed drastically. This resulted in graft versus host disease where his native immune system is fighting the donor. After going through so many different problems such as compartment syndrome, an antibiotic resistant infection, cancer, chemotherapy and their associated rounds of medicine, he had to be prescribed more. The numerous side effects came into play resulting in more prescribed medicine. I all the while felt useless and could not help. I thought it'd be easier. My dad choked every time he ate, now his eyes are constantly dry, and a never-ending cause and effect of medicines and side effects on top of the graft versus host disease.

I look for every opportunity to see the bright things in life. My favorite basketball team won, I was accepted into a prestigious private school, I have made numerous new friends, I have been working on my skills in the classroom and sports, and I have a good life. However, I would trade all of that, just to go back, and for my dad not to have gone through what he did. Cancer, is a terrible thing but the more people you have in your life to help and guide you, the easier it is to brave the storm.