



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

Alison Randa

Survival

Cancer made me an adult before time made me a teen. It took away my childhood and taught me how to survive in an unstable and scary world. When I was in fifth grade, my father was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. This was the second time he was diagnosed with cancer in my lifetime, the first being Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma when I was very young. As a two year old, I couldn't even spell my own name, much less comprehend cancer, so I don't remember it being a major part of my life. However, my 11-year-old self had no issue grasping the concept that my father suddenly had a very big chance of dying. Fifth graders are supposed to be excited for their graduation and going to middle school, not trying to keep up with an oncologist's explanation of the different types of treatments that their father has to choose from, but it was never really a choice for me.

My parents divorced when I was 10. They tried their best to make it the easiest for us, and I'll be the first to say they did a pretty good job, but there are some things that you can't make easier, no matter how hard you try. Divorce leaves a deep scar on everyone involved, regardless of your efforts. It was only one year after the divorce announcement when he was diagnosed. I felt like I was being pushed off of one incredibly unstable platform onto another. Like someone had put my life into a blender and forgot to turn it off. All I ever want to do is help the people around me, but how could I help get my family back onto stable ground? I knew that I needed to set a good example for my younger siblings. I did my best to comfort them when they were sad or confused and carried on like everything was normal. I tried to teach them how to help out around the house or play quiet games in the hospital waiting room, but it's impossible to control 3 kids, ages 4, 6, and 8, especially when you're only 11. I wanted to make it easier for my dad and the other adults around me, but I didn't know how, and that made me feel like I was a burden.

My dad is a trooper. No one on this planet can deny that. He started off his life with cancer, and to this day only has one kidney due to a tumor he had as a child. He had a tough family life and suffered through learning disabilities, but he pushed through it all and started a successful restaurant. He broke his back in a tractor accident, and during his surgery they found cancer. He overcame it, and almost 10 years later, he was diagnosed with a different kind. He's had cancer for the past 5 years, the majority of the time being stage 4. His favorite thing to say is "My kids don't even know what cancer looks like" because he has been so strong throughout his journey. And he's almost right. A lot of the time he hides it so well it's kind of hard to tell. But then there's the times where he can't be so strong. Where his body physically can not go any farther. That's where I come in. When he spends days unable to get out of bed, I wash the dishes

and make meals and make sure the homework's done. When he comes home after a treatment afraid that he won't make it through the night, I go to his house, make sure that he has water and food within reach, and check to make sure he's breathing every thirty minutes. When it takes him two minutes to go down the stairs, I stay with him the whole time. When he can't put on his shoes, I tie them silently. A man so this strong doesn't want to ask for help, but that doesn't mean he doesn't need it.

Times passed where the only thing we had to eat in the house were ramen and potato chips. He could barely take a shower, let alone grocery shop, and he couldn't let any one know he was suffering or ask for help. But I knew. I knew the whole time. And I've carried it with me. All the times that I sat in a dark, nearly empty house, awake until 2 in the morning on a school night to make sure my dad was ok. All the times that I made my siblings dinner or forged a signature to sign a daily journal. All the times that I cleaned the house at night or washed all of the dishes, only to have to do it again the next day and the next. You learn to say no to plans before you even ask, to shut your mouth before you air a complaint, and to generally just keep your head down and lock all your feelings away. Because there are bigger issues happening around you and you already know you can handle it. I often felt like I was just barely keeping my head above water, but the only thing that mattered was that I was doing it.

During my ninth-grade year, my father rapidly declined to the point where he was in multiple organ failure. For the first few days, I knew something was wrong, but I had no idea what. I walked through all of my classes like normal but spent my time after school at Penn Medicine. When I was finally told what was happening, I spent my day at school feeling like I was walking around on broken glass. I was in a lot of pain, but if there is one thing I have learned so far, it's how to hide emotions. I acted like nothing was happening and I continued my

day. My clearest memory of that time is one day after school when I walked into my empty house. I screamed and cried my head off for 10 minutes. I yelled about how my brothers were going to have been too young to remember him, I shouted my anger for a world that was going to take away my dad so soon, and I sobbed thinking about every time that we had ever fought. Then I picked myself up, dried my tears, and greeted my siblings as they got off their bus.

My life so far has been filled with ups and downs. At this point, I can barely remember a life that wasn't filled with hospital visits and chemo rooms and trying to find new ways to entertain three incredibly bored but loud children. A life that wasn't filled with medications or health scares or trying to be a mom when we were away from ours. Cancer has infiltrated my life and made me the person I am today. I'm cool under pressure because sometimes you have to be the one to take a two hour car ride with a man who is being physically paralyzed in front of your eyes because there isn't enough room in the other car and you have to be the one to pull over and call the police in case he dies in front of you. I can separate myself from my emotions because sometimes you have to be the strong one who holds and comforts people when you have to talk about hospice and assisted suicide. I can adapt to any situation because sometimes a night doing homework turns into taking an Uber to your dad's house because everyone is worried that he won't make it through the night and you have to make sure he does. Cancer made me an adult. It ripped away my childhood and taught me how to survive.