



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

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Naya

Our summer days were anything anyone could ever ask for. My cousin Zak and I would have a catch with a tennis ball, while my cousin Naya and sister Olivia would relax in the middle of the pool. Sam, the young but very strong and feisty German shepherd, would try to chase down the tennis ball. If I had the ball, Sam would bolt over to me and jump in the pool to try and snatch it. But once I threw the ball to Zak, Sam would explode out of the pool and use his powerful legs to zip to the other end of the ball to try and get the ball. It was very fun teasing him until either my cousin or myself would accidentally bobble the ball, and Sam would pounce on our mistake. When this would happen, the girls would laugh while both my cousin Zak and I hopped out of the pool and sprinted after that German Shephard as if we were chasing someone who had just robbed a bank. These summer days were everything. Life was so simple back then. It was always the four of us doing an activity together. Whether Zak, Olivia, Naya, and I were arguing over who should get the remote for the television, playing very competitive board games, playing with the dogs, or enjoying each other's company. But that all was stolen away. Something so unexpected turned our lives completely around. We would soon be able to get to know who was responsible for this. It was some sort of powerful monster. It was a relentless, vigorous, and an evil beast, one that's motor never stopped. My aunt told me that this monster's name was cancer.

Naya was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of brain cancer. Being 8 at the time, I didn't quite know just how momentous the word cancer really was. I wondered

What really is cancer. Why did it happen to Naya? When will she be free of cancer? Again, I still didn't quite know just how severe cancer was.

Just two weeks after she had been diagnosed, and I was going to see her for the first time. As my dad, sister, and I drove over to their house, my dad informed us about what to expect. "Just know that Naya's hair has been cut off. She's going to be bald." It had only been two weeks and her hair was already being cut off? From this moment on, I understood that cancer was a real, ruthless, and unpredictable beast. I started to gauge the severity of what cancer really is.

We arrived at my cousin's house, and we walked into the living room. We all gave Naya big hugs because we knew just how hard it was for her. My dad made sure to not ask any questions that might make Naya feel uneasy. He would just ask how she was feeling, how her horse was doing, and how her school has been. As my dad began to converse with them, I started to notice something looming in Naya's eyes. She had always had a spark of joy that was present in her eyes. Her eyes would give off an aura that showed a love of life, and a pure joy. Her eyes didn't quite show that. What I saw was someone who was scared. I recognized that whenever the topic would change to her cancer, she would look away and stare into space. I could tell she was in a state of deep thought when she did this. And I couldn't even imagine the fear that swirled around her head. It was clear to me that part of her love of life had been snatched away.

Though her body and mind have been affected by her cancer, she was still able to do fun things. Today some of my family and some of her family went to the aquarium. We had a great time at the aquarium, and I was beginning to see Naya's true side again. After a great day, she and the rest of her family invited us to come to eat. As we started eating at the dinner table, I saw Naya didn't have a plate of food. We ate our dinner, watched a movie, and then we left to go home. "Why didn't Naya eat any food for dinner?" I asked.

My dad turned to me and sighed, "Well, Naya has lost her appetite for food. Her brain tumor has made her really not crave foods at all. She mostly has to get her caloric intake from feeding tubes."

"Oh, I didn't know what," I responded. I stared into the night's sky, and I just wondered how could this happen to Naya. She can't even do something as simple as eating dinner. It just seemed completely wrong. And just the little things like not being able to go to school, hardly being able to hang out, and no eating without feeding tube just rotted my stomach. An 11-year-old shouldn't have to go through this.

One night we were spending time at my cousin's house. While the rest of my family was watching TV, my cousin openly taught me about her type of cancer. She informed me about her specific type of cancer. She highlighted just how rare it was and exactly where and how it was affecting her brain. I was very shocked that she was so open about her cancer to me. I'd always had a very strong relationship with her, but it still surprised just how she was so comfortable talking to me about such a sensitive topic. The way in which she spoke reminded me of her old-self once again. I caught a glimpse of her wise, joyful, and happy side once again.

Months went by and instead of going to their house every weekend, we would go to their house every day. Naya had lost an eye-popping amount of weight. She hadn't gone to school for a very long time now. It felt like for every step Naya took forward, her cancer would push her back another 5 steps. She was getting worse by the day now. It felt like every single moment that I shared with her needed to be cherished. It was clear, that she was starting to begin to suffer.

One day during school, my mom called in to pick me up. I knew it had to be about Naya. I shook my head and gently put the phone down. I gathered my belongings, and I made my way to the main office to get picked up by my mom.

We made our way to my dad's house, where my mom had to grab a few things. I stayed in the car and really thought about the entire situation. I had seen most of the steps of Naya's cancer journey. It had been a long battle, but this was the first time that I even thought of this one word. This very frightening word: Death. My parents would sometimes tell me that there would be a chance that Naya wouldn't make it. This never really mixed into my brain. But now, I was facing reality. There was no escape. I knew that soon she would be gone from the earth, and that there will always be a missing piece in my family.

After a few weeks in the hospital room, Naya was brought back to my aunt and uncle's house. This allowed everyone whose lives were touched by Naya to come get a last moment with her.

After staying at my cousins' house for multiple days, Naya eventually passed away. All of the memories that we had seemed like a distant past. There would be no more days where it would be all four of us at the pool. Naya wouldn't be able to pursue her aspired marine biology career. She wouldn't be able to continue to grow up with us, have a family, or go to college. Naya had such a bright future, but the beast snatched that away from her. Naya was no longer here. She started her own foundation, helped raise awareness towards childhood cancer, and impacted countless lives due to her amazing fight. The memories I shared with her at the pool, or our conversation at the dinner table or our days at the aquarium will never be forgotten. Naya was a fighter and an activist for childhood cancer research. Naya has left such an amazing legacy on this earth. She will never be forgotten in my heart.