



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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The Sun on My Back

With sweaty palms and an anticipatory gaze, I counted down the seconds, like a dog waiting by the door for something to bark at. My tiny hands left prints on the window, my hair unbrushed because my mom couldn't keep me still long enough to run a comb through its craggy ends. This wasn't just any plain day; my heart did leaps and bounds as the tiny silver car rolled up our driveway: a universal sign that my aunt was coming for a visit. My Aunt Jen was no ordinary aunt. She could never overstay her welcome. In fact, when she told me it was time for her to go back home, I cried and clawed at the door, begging her to stay just an extra hour, or maybe even have a sleepover, just this once of course. But, my aunt taught me a lesson that has been all too real to learn: sometimes people you love leave you in presence, but never in spirit.

Aunt Jen never married or had kids, which she made up for in her huge network of friends. She had friends in every continent, all that would gladly take a bullet for her. When she would come for her visits, often home from months of sailing in Greece, or drinking wine from

the vineyards of Southern France, she would sit across from my sister and I, telling marvelous stories of her adventures. And as I sat cross-legged and jaw dropped, I ate up every word she said, like droplets of honey reaching my lips.

My aunt was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2012. At this point she was still travelling the world, but when she heard the news, she knew she had to come home and begin chemotherapy. Her sister (my other aunt), Aunt Jill, had passed away from ovarian cancer ten years prior. They were two peas in a pod, my aunt often telling me she saw herself and her sister in my sister and me.

In my family, there is an ongoing joke that I am strikingly similar to my aunt, both the youngest of four children, and the spunky, dramatic child. Whereas my sister resembled my aunt's sister, Jill: the levelheaded, determined third child. I always took being my Aunt Jen's mini-me like a badge of honor. Because we were so similar, my aunt became the person I confided in with my coming of age drama. Despite being recently diagnosed with cancer, my aunt listened as I ranted about my parents or school bullies. She listened and celebrated when I had good news, like getting the lead in the school play. And she listened even when there were no words to say, like how could she possibly have cancer, when she was supposed be with me my whole life. She was supposed to watch me graduate, dance at my wedding, and meet my future kids.

My aunt was the most special person in my life, teaching me the gift of gratitude. She didn't view her cancer as an excuse to indulge in self-pity, but as a reason to see as much of the world as she could. There's an arsenal of photos of my aunt and her bald head in various places

across the world. Cancer did not stop my aunt from traveling; she saw it as a sign to do everything she had ever dreamed of.

However, my aunt knew that no place was as special as being with her family. She took each one of her nieces and nephews on birthday outings so that we could get undivided attention from an adult, something kids crave growing up in a large family. These days are some of the best memories I have with her— going out for ice cream, bowling, or shopping—the epitome of every little kid’s best day ever! Not only was my aunt a “Mary Poppins” figure, who would swoop in with presents and surprise trips. She was there for the harder parts too. Like when I got sick on my mom’s first day of her new job, and my Aunt dropped everything to drive 45 minutes to pick me up and smother me with hugs and ginger ale. Or when she would come to my house after receiving chemotherapy and wipe *my* tears.

Three months ago, cancer stole my Aunt from my family. But, cancer also gave my family an unbelievable bond. Because of my aunt’s condition and her attitude towards it, we dedicated so much more time to being together and enjoying the time we did have. Thus in 2018, my aunt surprised my whole family with a cruise to Bermuda. This five-day trip united my family and gave me memories I will hold onto for forever. My aunt’s philosophy of life was that you can always make more money, but you cannot make more time. So, we cherished every second we had with her. Cancer made us cuddle closer, laugh louder, and count our blessings every day.

Although my Aunt passed away at the age of 53, I know that she lived a full life, not taking a single moment for granted. She taught me that the little things are what life is all about: the birthday outings, surprise visits, and empty boxes of tissues. She was the glue of our family,

and today we are united by the memory of her. Although my aunt has left me, she continues to guide me in life. I am reminded each day of her beauty and grace as I navigate a world without her. But I still feel her as the sun on my back, the wind through my hair, and most importantly the love in my heart. I have been so blessed to know my aunt. I would be so lucky to be half of the person she was. Her legacy lives on in me and my siblings and cousins as she taught us that nothing, not even cancer, could ruin the love of family.