



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

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The Five Lessons Cancer Taught Me

Last year I got my tonsils removed. They took them out in May. I missed two weeks of school. Every day, my father would come in too my room with a milkshake in his hand, help me downstairs, and watch hours upon hours of Criminal Minds with me (a show he suffered through because it was my favorite). He never complained. He was there when I needed him most. Flash forward almost a year, and I am writing this essay next to my father. Right now, he is going through his fourth round of chemotherapy. In July, he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of Pancreatic cancer. He used to have a beard that my mother constantly asked him to shave. He had a big, jolly belly that he lost along with his appetite. Instead of him grabbing me ice cream when my throat hurts, I am grabbing him blankets to make sure he is warm. Over the past ten months, my father's fight has been long and hard. Nothing could make me grow up faster than this last year. I have observed, listened, and learned; and there are five main lessons I will never forget.

1. Even when you think you are ready, you are not.

It is hard to watch a parent become so ill. A parent who used to build me doll houses and swing sets who can no longer tie his own shoes. No one tells you the reality of a cancer diagnoses in your family. You think you are strong enough, but somehow you are never truly ready. Just when you get used to one change--like a treatment routine—it gets totally erased. When my father would go to chemo on Mondays, I would be ready to make myself dinner. Finally, I learned to watch TV while I ate so I didn't get so lonely. As soon as I learned this trick, his treatment moved to two weeks of chemotherapy and radiation every day. It's much harder to convince yourself you're not eating alone for two straight weeks. I was not prepared for this. That's the funny thing about trauma: it doesn't care if you're ready. It's the ultimate dodgeball you can never seem to dodge.

2. You are no longer scared of the dark.

I used to be so scared of the dark. I would make my mother check under my bed every night for monsters (literally until I was almost 12). I realize how silly this is, but it made total sense to my preteen self-conscious. Fears can be silly like that. Now I am scared for the future.

Sometimes I am scared to go out. What if I leave and something happens? A fear that sounds so ridiculous is now always in my mind. As I go on to college, I need to learn that I cannot always be there. It is hard to be your own person when a family member gets diagnosed with cancer. My father does not want his illness to slow down my dreams. I will work to make him proud.

3. People are driven with empathy.

When he first got diagnosed, I was convinced everyone would forget and I would be all alone. If I could go back in time to any moment in my past, I would go back to the day I thought this and tell myself how ridiculous I was being. For months, people brought over homemade meals and gift cards. Every time someone saw my mother and I, they would ask how my father is doing. It's been ten months since my father got diagnosed with cancer and my best friends' family still brings over two meals a week. These are the acts of kindness I will cherish with me forever.

4. You're are tougher than you think.

I know this contradicts my first lesson learned (review lesson #1 for more details) but people are tough when they need to be. I may not have been ready for every change in our family's lifestyle, but I did not back down from these challenges. My father is the toughest man I know. When I was ten, he had almost eight blood clots—including clots in his Aorta and lungs—from a disease called Factor Five. I don't think I ever heard him say he was in pain once. Not through the blood clots, not through the chemo, and not through the radiation either. My father has passed down this trait apparently. Although it may stink to sit alone at the kitchen table, I have learned to become a mediocre cook (silver lining!).

While this may not sound very tough, I turned a bad situation into a good life skill, and that positivity is reflective of my perseverance. A tough attitude is the number one-character trait of a teenage girl going through family trauma. Whether that is shown through her positivity or cooking skills, she always finds a way to make it through. I find this this very impressive (although I may be slightly biased).

5. Time with your loved ones is precious.

This is very cheesy. I am sorry in advance if you are lactose intolerant. I cherish every second I spend with my father now, even if we are bickering! I go on walks almost every day with my mom. My twin brother, Jake, and I talk more now than we ever did before. I check in on how my friends are doing, I call my extended family, and I carve out serious time for the people in my life. Last year I would have said I had years left with my father. I pray that is still true, but life is short and unexpected. It's memories now that will fill that void when your loved ones are gone. It's the time you spent with them that will keep you going.

My father's illness has changed my life in a million different ways. From schoolwork to my social life, I am constantly thinking about him. Cancer sucks. Cancer changes lives. Cancer has changed mine. Although it has been hard—and we have surely struggled—I have prioritized my time in ways I may not have before. I am thankful for my family and friends. I am thankful for the time I have with my father. These five lessons will stick with me as we continue his fight. As I sit here, with my father, typing away on this laptop, I pray for a good ending. I pray that one day my father will be taking care of me again when I have a cold or the flu. I pray for more family trips and dinners. More long episodes of Criminal Minds that I will make him sit through. I pray for the people who will understand my struggle. I pray for a happy ending.