



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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My Journey

My journey with cancer begins at the young age of two. For months my parents were questioning a peculiar “birthmark” that was slowly taking over my entire stomach. Determined for answers, my parents brought me to see a dermatologist who recommended a biopsy be done immediately. After weeks of anxiously waiting for results, they informed us that I was suffering from Dermatofibrosarcoma Protuberans (DFSP), a rare skin tumor that is normally treated with chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation treatment. DFSP most commonly affects adults aged 20-50 years old. Due to my young age, and the rarity of DFSP, it took months to find a doctor willing to treat me. Finally the wait was over, a doctor by the name of Christopher Miller decided to take a chance on me. He travelled to come meet with my family and after looking at my case he decided that he wanted to remove my tumor through surgery. After transferring hospitals and getting clearances he was able to perform the surgery I needed. Now being three years old I was prepped and ready to undergo surgery. While being in surgery it was found that the cancer had

spread more rapidly and widely than thought. The tumor had wrapped around the walls of my stomach and was terribly close to my organs, making the surgery more complicated and long. After a profoundly long 7 hour surgery, Dr. Miller was able inform my parents, that despite the complications that I was in recovery.

Recovering after surgery was a long and tiresome process. I was unable to do anything a normal kid my age would do, including running and swimming. Although spending a period of time sitting on the side of the pool and watching, I was determined to make a healthy and full recovery. Recovery was full of long trips to the hospital for checkups. It started with going every two weeks, and gradually they started moving farther and farther apart. After months of sitting around and traveling to and from the hospital, they told us that I was in remission. I was now four and officially cancer-free. I was able to be a kid again, although I did not want my journey to end there.

After the recovery process my family discovered an event called Relay for Life, that helps raise money for cancer research, and decided we wanted to participate. At the age of six, I decided that I wanted to help other kids who were going through the same thing I did. After talking to my parents, we decided to start our own Relay for Life team named Kyleigh's Wings to help raise money ourselves for cancer research. We set up a tent with many activities such as a candy bar wheel and dice games and walked for two days straight to raise as much money as possible for research. After having extreme amounts of fun planning for the event and participating in it, we decided to make our team an annual activity. After seeing many other young kids going through different treatments with different side effects, I decided I wanted to grow my hair out so I could donate it for someone who needed it. My words to my mom were "I want to grow my hair so they can have some too". Donated my hair at the ages of six and eight.

I had my Relay for Life team for eight years during which we raised thousands of dollars for cancer research. Although I no longer have my own team, I still like to participate in Relay for Life. I work with multiple other Relay for Life teams, including my high schools team, the cheerleading programs team, and some of the high school clubs teams. While being in high school I also have helped to plan my schools Mini THON that is held every year, this event raises money to help children and their families to fight cancer. Further, because of being on my high schools cheerleading team I was given the opportunity to design and sell the football cancer awareness shirts, in which the proceeds were donated to St. Luke's Cancer Center.

I am now seventeen years old and have been cancer-free for fourteen years, though my journey with cancer is far from over. I have plans to one day do community service in the hospital to work with cancer patients. As well as hope to work in a hospital working with medicine and the creation of it. With a major in pre-medical Biochemistry, I hope to one day achieve my goal of finding a cure for cancer.