



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

Lily Wu

Immortal

Growing up, I'd never really gone to church regularly. It wasn't really a part of my life. That changed when Bryant Geating came to be our new youth pastor.

I wasn't present when he first met with the youth group to get to know us, but I was surprised at how that didn't seem to make any difference. Whether it was someone's first time coming or their umpteenth, Bryant went out of his way to initiate discussion with them and integrate them into the group. That was what he did for me, and it was undoubtedly the warmth that he showed that started to pull me to church consistently every Sunday. He made our church seem like a lively, affectionate place. When he stood behind the podium to deliver sermons, he gave the sense that there was nothing he would rather be doing than proclaiming those words to us. He got us excited to be there. As a pastor, he was energetic and enthusiastic – that seemed very unconventional to me, and it was very charming to all of us in youth group. As a person, he was down-to-earth and approachable, always spouting off hilarious anecdotes about his rambunctious adventures in his youth – again, unconventional for us to hear from a church adult. He worked hard to convince us that he was one of us, and we knew that we could talk to and trust him.

When I was feeling down or needed advice, I went to him, and he listened and engaged with me. As a moody twelve-year-old at the time, it was dignifying to feel like I was being heard and validated rather than just humored, and that encouraged me to open up more and bounce my curiosity off of him with badgering questions. Bryant

always answered them the best that he could and flipped the question back to me and encouraged me to discuss my thoughts with him. That was one of Bryant's greatest abilities, to make meaningful conversation with people. He made them feel cared for and listened to and made them feel like they deserved it all. He became not only my church pastor, but my friend as well. He encouraged me to come to attend church regularly so that we could talk more, and gradually, church was integrated as a part of my life.

Predictably, people at our church loved Bryant. He loved them back, with an endearingly ferocious vigor. He was always reaching out to people to make plans outside of church, especially with our youth group. He loved doing physical activities with us – he played tennis with a friend and me over the summer and came to watch my school matches in the fall. He took my dad and I out for a walk in a park, and entertained us with stories of how as a teenager he'd once chased a deer for hours through those very trees and into the neighborhood, and had finally conceded when an elderly man had yelled at him to get off of the property. Decades later, Bryant was still bouncing with that inexhaustible energy – he was unstoppable. That was *him*. But within a few months, it was all uprooted.

In 2018, our summer missionary trip was fast-paced and lively; it took us a few moments to realize that Bryant hadn't gotten out of the car. We found him laying down, having pulled the seats down, and he apologized for not joining us. He wasn't feeling well, he said. He was battered with fatigue all of a sudden. Bryant was a resilient guy, so all of us knew that the pain was truly unbearable when he retired from the event prematurely to go to the doctor. They thought he had Lyme Disease at first, but later, it was confirmed to be leukemia.

Honestly, when I heard the news, I didn't have an instant reaction. It was a surreal experience, and from the beginning I sheltered myself by trying to reason. He was 57, not young, but he had more energy and pep than all of us teenagers combined! Plus, the doctors – the medical professionals – said that they'd caught the disease pretty early, and while he didn't have a guaranteed chance of survival, his chance of dying was not overwhelming, either. Actually, after Bryant began treatment, he seemed the least distressed out of all of us. He insisted that he was carrying on fine and that he would fight; in fact, the only frown I saw on his face after the news was him jokingly lamenting that his wife wouldn't spoil him. He continued to chirp at church, and he continued to spend time with us. A huge part of what motivated him was his faith. It seemed that Bryant was fighting to keep his connection with God rather than fighting the sickness. He'd told us in sermons that he strove to make his faith the crux of his identity, and despite cancer, Bryant's faith prevailed. He trusted in his Savior and his devoutness strengthened; the challenge to remain spiritual and upbeat seemed to

invigorate him. He wanted to take care of his spiritual health as well as physical. Observing him, I felt a reverence for his fortitude and spirit.

Yet, that liveliness was no longer inexhaustible, and it was unsustainable. As Bryant began chemotherapy, his energy was sapped and it took more effort for him to smile, yet he continued to push through. Having revisiting our thread of texts, it's sad to see how they petered off eventually in length and frequency during this time. He had no energy to be challenged by me with questions and remarks. Still, he inquired as to how I was doing, and when I asked how he was, he confided in me about his aches and pains.

Around Thanksgiving time, as out of nowhere as the first news had been, we were told that Bryant had recovered well from his bone marrow transplant. My family and I visited him as he was leaving the hospital. Although he was mentally and physically drained, his eyes were bright with wonder as he was wheeled out. The entire scene still felt like a dream, like something that would just as well have never happened. I always knew that he would overcome this, after all.

When Christmastime was around the corner, the third flash of news came: Bryant had the flu and it broke his weakened immune system. They sent him back to the hospital, and this time, it finally sank in. The situation had swung from feeling unreal to too real. He'd been on the cusp of being completely healed, I thought. He'd made it so far; *we'd* made it so far. Now it was snatched away, and things were bleak. On a dreary evening, my family and I came to say goodbye to him. He was in comatose as I read a letter that I'd written to him, and my dad told me that Bryant's hand had been clinching slightly. "He was fighting to show you that he heard you," my dad said. That comforted me. Bryant was a fighter. He fought to the very end, and then he went peacefully the next morning.

Within a few months since his diagnosis, a lot of things had happened. The gravity of the situation unleashed a flood of turbulence and disorientation, and it took a few more months for the saturation to permeate. A few months ago, the word "cancer" was just a zodiac sign and "terminal" was just a place in the airport. After losing Bryant, I realized how fragile life could be, that people weren't immortal or invincible as it had seemed. I was young and untraveled in life - I still am - but I realized that life wasn't perennial. It was after meeting Bryant and saying goodbye, all within the span of one year, that I got a firsthand dose of how unpredictable life is. Bryant *deserved* to live the rest of his life joyfully with his family and friends. He was an amazing man. Yet, death came for him. Instead of feeling forlorn and nihilistic as a result, I was inspired, as I knew Bryant would want me to be. Because life is not a promise, every day should be breathed in with gratitude. He lived that way with that very mentality, and I believe that that was why he fought his body every time, just to muster a brief smile.

Bryant had shown us how strong someone could be in a world that seemed neither fair nor predictable. He persevered through pain. It was immeasurably inspiring to see him continue to fight and find reasons to be happy amidst the turbulence, and the memory of his fortitude is fresh and clear in my mind. My memory of him encourages me to rise to the challenge of adversity with grit and a steady mindset with him as the archetype. Through me and his loved ones who never forget him, he is immortal.



Teen Essay Contests

Contest Guidelines

Eligibility

- Students must have a cancer connection and live in Bucks, Montgomery, Philadelphia, Delaware or Chester Counties
- Middle School contest is for 6th - 8th grades.
- High School contest is for 9th - 12th grades.

Entry Rules

- Each student may submit only one original essay authored by the student.
- Parent Signed Entry form required.
- Digital photo required. Send as a jpeg.
- Middle School contest 500 - 750 words.
- High School contest 750 - 1500 words.
- Include essay title at the top of each page.
- Do not include name on the essay.
- Winners' schools will be notified.
- All essays and photos will be posted on our website.

Winning Essays/Awards Ceremony

- Winners will be informed on Monday, April 27th. All writers are invited to attend Awards ceremony Tuesday, May 12th 7 p.m.

Essay Deadline

- Entries must be submitted via email in a word document to Christina@cancersupportphiladelphia.org by midnight Monday, April 13, 2020
- Late entries will not be accepted.

Judging Process

Essays are evaluated in a fair and unbiased judging process. Submissions will be evaluated on:

- Personal voice: Judges will be looking for an interesting engaging essay told in your own words. The essay should describe your experience and an overall message about how your experience with cancer impacted your life.
- Clarity and Style: Judges will look for a clear and consistent focus in your writing and a logical progression of ideas. Good grammar, accurate word choices, correct punctuation, and varying sentence structure should be used.

Contest Entry Form

Name Lily Wu

Address 9 White Birch Ln

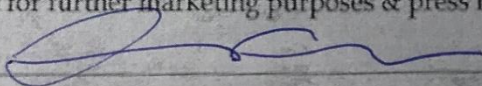
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Grade 9 School Name Hatboro-Horsham High School

Title of Essay Immortal

Parents/Guardians: I give CSCGP permission to use my teen's name, essay and photo on their website, social media & for further marketing purposes & press materials.

Parent/Guardian Signature 

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