



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
High School  
Teen Essay Contest

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## Discovering Magic

It's always worse the second time. The second time you're told that the most important person in your life has cancer.

I was five years old the first time my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had absolutely no idea what it meant. I did not understand why my mom was always in the hospital or going to doctor appointments all day, leaving my brothers and I with babysitters or on long playdates. I didn't understand why my mom was often too sick or tired to play with me like she used to, and why she lost all of her hair. I remember asking my father as he tucked me into bed one night if Mommy could come home from the hospital and tuck me in, too. He told me he would do anything in the world to cure her cancer and bring her home right away to tuck me in, but he doesn't have magical powers, so we'll have to wait. But, he assured me that if at any point he acquired any magic powers, he'd let me know. It wasn't the answer I wanted, but for some reason, his words remained tucked inside my head.

I remember the night my parents broke the news for the second time. I was in sixth grade and I had just gotten home from a fun night of ice skating. It was like there was a hidden chest of memories in my mind and that upon hearing my mom say the words "I have cancer", the key went into the lock and the chest flew open. While my memories from the first time mom had cancer weren't all clear, all of the scary feelings came back into my head and my heart. The memory of my father's words as he had tucked me in so many years before and many other forgotten moments of fear and sadness flooded my thoughts all night. I sobbed into my pillow until sleep replaced the sadness.

The sleepless nights became routine. Day after day, I pushed those memories, along with the new ones I was creating, back into the chest and shut it tight. This time, I better understood what a cancer diagnosis could mean. This time, the fears were grounded in facts and knowledge that I wished I didn't know. Cancer was an evil disease that could take my mom away from us, and it wasn't fair. I felt like the weight of the world in fear and worry was constantly on my shoulders. Even at times when, for a little while, I would forget about cancer and I would laugh and have fun with my friends, I would suddenly be reminded of what was happening to my family, and it would feel like the floor fell out from under me. Eventually, I grew tired of this mentally draining routine that kept me in the same despairing state every day. I was tired of feeling so hopeless, and unable to do anything to help.

I already knew of the Susan G. Komen organization and their annual 3-day walk for breast cancer research funding, as my mom had done it in her years between cancers, and I knew you must be 16 to participate. One curious morning, I pulled out my mom's laptop and did some googling. I went to Susan G. Komen's website and investigated if there was any possible way a participant could be younger than 16. That was when I saw the option for a group called youth corps. Clicking on that tab changed my life.

I was presented with a lengthy application process for kids ages 10-15 that would accept 20 out of nearly 400 applicants. The ratio was intimidating, but why not? After a long application, an essay, and multiple phone interviews, I could not believe they had chosen me! Here was my opportunity to *do* something, to make a contribution towards helping support cancer research. Even as an 11 year old, I felt empowered to do my part to make a difference.

Within the next year, I worked hard to fundraise the \$500 that each member was required to raise. I stood outside store fronts in the freezing cold, shivering in my huge puffy jacket with a bucket in one hand and a poster in the other. I designed my own t-shirts and sold them in my community. I spent long nights baking every type of sweet treat I possibly could, to sell them outside my mom's office. At the end of the year I had raised \$1,500, triple the amount required. My mom was so proud of me, and I was proud of myself.

I have since participated in this event two more times and raised more than \$4,000 for breast cancer research. My hope for the future is that young girls and boys won't have to wonder why their mom can't tuck them in at night.

Cancer has had a major impact on my life and the life of my family in many ways. Twelve years later, my mom continues to battle the disease. Over the years there have been challenging times, but I can't say that nothing good has come from the experience... through my mom's battle, I have learned the value of having a close and loving family. Together, we face the difficult things in life, and together, we get through. Through volunteering, I have a deep appreciation for helping others and giving back to the community that has been there to support my family. I have learned that I can make a difference.

I often think back to the words my father spoke to me that night when I was five. Maybe, like him, I don't have magical powers that can cure cancer, but I am a powerful individual. I am empowered by my experiences to create change and to help others, and that's about as close to magic as it gets.