



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

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Overcoming Cancer

“A disease in which abnormal cells divide uncontrollably and destroy body tissue.” With a definition as simple as that, cancer sure does not make anything simple. Cancer ruins lives, takes people away from their family, friends, and everyone that they love. Sometimes it's treatable, sometimes there's nothing anyone can do to fix it. No other disease compares to cancer. It is the body's cells turning on the body, sometimes with no cause in sight. With no cure, there's only so much doctors can do for certain people. My dad got lucky, but plenty of people are not so lucky. “Lucky” simply means that he survived. Our family is still terrified every day, worried that history will repeat itself for the third time.

When my dad first got cancer, I was down the shore for a week with my best friend. Instead of telling me and ruining the trip, my parents took the burden upon themselves and waited until I got home to tell my sister and I. We all knew it was a possibility since my dad had been smoking since he was young, but we never thought it would actually happen. After he was diagnosed, he got tested to see if the cancer had any mutations. There is a mutation found in Asian non-smokers, so naturally, we assumed this mutation was out of the question. Surprisingly, he had the mutation, allowing him to take pills instead of chemotherapy and radiation. For a long time, that was it. He just took pills and everything was fine.

Last year on Saint Patrick's Day, we found out my dad also has brain cancer. One day, I told him I was going out with my friend Bella, who he has known for 5 years. He kept asking me what boys I was going out with, so I assumed it was a joke and left. He asked my mom again what boys I was with. My dad reads my sister books every night, and while reading he began messing up simple words. After these signs, he went to the doctor and found out. The doctors found this cancer was also mutated, and he would be able to take pills again. Since then, everything has been fine.

Two years ago, my friend whose mom also had cancer introduced us to Camp Kesem. Kesem was by far the best thing that has ever happened to me. Being able to be around people that have gone through or are going through the same thing you are is incredible. Having people that share this experience in my life is something I will forever be grateful for. I cannot wait for camp this year, even though it is only going to be online. Being able to have a week every year surrounded by people that I love is incredible. Kesem has made it easier to talk to people about what my family and I have been through. It has connected me to so many new people I would have never met without camp. Sharing that experience with so many people has helped me in so many different ways. All summer camps are fun, but there is no other camp that has the magic of Kesem.

Gilda's Club was also introduced to me by my friend after my dad was diagnosed. Gilda's Club is a year-round support group. My sister went to the summer camp, and I volunteered at the camp to help the little kids. The camp was like Kesem since we all had experienced cancer, and it was nice to be able to help young kids get their minds off of that. Volunteering for two weeks was an amazing experience where I was able to meet many new people and spend more time with my friends. The volunteers were able to create activities for the kids and see how happy and excited they were to do the activities. During camp, I was also able to spend more time with my friends that showed me Gilda's and become friends with other volunteers. The year-round activities were just as fun as camp, such as Christmas breakfast, support meetings every week, baking, and cooking. Gilda's Club has been an incredible support, and it is a reminder that people have experienced what I have and understand it completely.

Although having a parent with cancer is a terrifying experience, the support my family received from support groups, our friends, and each other helped us get through it all. As much as I wish my family never had experienced cancer, cancer gave us the unexpected gift of Kesem, Gilda's Club, and becoming closer as a family. I would not trade my experiences at Kesem or Gilda's Club for the world, and I am so grateful for everyone at those organizations. These organizations gave us the strength we needed to get through cancer and not feel so alone.