



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

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My Journey to Hope

My story starts 10 years ago in 2010 when I was in kindergarten. I was just 5 years old and my sister was 3. Two days before Halloween, I was diagnosed with a diffuse fibrillary astrocytoma, a type of brain cancer. The tumor affected my right eye and made it hard for me to see. I didn't understand much of what was happening because I was just a little girl. I was supposed to be living my life like any other 5-year old but instead, I was battling cancer. All I really remember feeling is scared and confused about what was about to happen. Although I was able to go home after my first appointment at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), that was just the beginning of my journey.

My parents started working with the hospital to come up with a plan. The first step was for me to get a biopsy which would help the doctors better understand my cancer. Then, I had surgery to get a port in my chest to make it easier to administer my chemotherapy medicine. A few weeks later, just when I thought things couldn't get worse, I broke my arm at recess in kindergarten. I remember that I saw the zipline and really wanted to try it even though I didn't know how. I only held on with one hand and the next thing I knew, I was falling to the ground. I landed on my left arm in so much pain. The teacher took me to the nurse to lie down until my mom came. I was terrified and overwhelmed about everything happening. My mom took me in an ambulance to Abington Hospital but with everything that was going on she thought it would be better to take me to CHOP.

In the beginning of 2011, I started chemotherapy because the doctors believed it would be the best possible treatment. I would go into the hospital once a week for the treatment, and the other days I would go to school. I think I enjoyed kindergarten because it made me forget

everything else that was happening in my life, even if only for a few hours. Often, I would get fevers and we had to go back to the hospital because my port could get infected. As time passed, the appointments would be once every two weeks and eventually, I took chemo pills at home. They were absolutely horrible. As a matter of fact, my parents put the pills in peanut butter, to try and drown out the flavor. Unfortunately, it didn't work because I would often throw them up which is why I no longer like peanut butter. The chemotherapy also made me lose my hair which is a common side effect. It took me a little while to adjust to my new look without feeling insecure. Overall, the chemo did end up helping me.

During my time in the hospital, I still tried to have fun with my mom. CHOP always had art projects, games, movies, and activities for the children. I remember my first time watching the Jungle Book was while I was going through chemo. That used to be my favorite movie! During chemo, the doctors gave me an IV pump on a pole that gave me my medicine. Since I had to take it everywhere, my mom and I decided to give it a name. His name was Bart. Also, when I had my biopsy, my aunt put all these fish and starfish on the windows and made it like an aquarium in my room. I remember it making me really happy during that really difficult time. I even made friends in the hospital who I will never forget. One friend who I met on the first day of my treatment had the best personality. Unfortunately she died a few years later which left me devastated because she was with me during my time in the hospital. She didn't deserve to die, which is one of the things that inspired me to do everything I can to give back.

Today, I am a ninth grader at Upper Dublin High School and am doing much better. I still go to CHOP twice a year for appointments. Over the past 6 years, I have been participating in the CHOP Parkway Run/Walk. I lead my own team, Strides For Sara, every September. The reason I started this team was to give back to the hospital for everything they did to help me. I wouldn't even be alive right now if it weren't for the doctors at CHOP. I have raised over \$50,000 for them and plan to raise more over the years. This money will hopefully help researchers find a cure for cancer so other kids don't have to go through what I did.

I think this experience has also had a big impact on my family. To be honest, back then I never realized how much my cancer affected my sister. She had to become independent because my parents were giving lots of their attention to me. We would have to drop her off at one of her friend's houses everytime we went to the hospital. I really can't even imagine her experience during that time. My parents were also affected greatly as they were the ones who had to make all the decisions and take care of me. They were always there for me, and I appreciate that so much. My mom would always tell me how I was the one comforting her in the hospital instead of the other way around. They are really the best parents ever, and I can't imagine how hard it was for them to see me sick.

It's hard to believe that 10 years ago I was battling cancer, while now I am living my life like any other kid. I am so grateful that I made it through that tough time, and that I have so many people that care about me. Often I think about how my doctors call me a miracle because I survived against all odds. That makes me feel special, like I can do anything. This experience definitely made me stronger because I feel more confident in myself than ever. I know if I put

my mind to something I will succeed. But then, sometimes there is this shadow of doubt that rolls over me. What if the cancer comes back? What if I die? Would people even remember me? I don't know the answer to any of these questions, and I really hope I never have to find out because for now, I'm happy.