



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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Dare to Win

It all started in the summer of 2015. It was our annual beach vacation. Just ordinary beach days relaxing, swimming and going to the boardwalk. Until the earache started. The earache that never really went away, the earache that changed everything.

At first, my mom thought it was Swimmer`s ear or some type of infection. We were using every medicine we could think of and visiting the doctors nonstop. Nothing would work and the earache was getting worse. One day I remember walking up from the dock, under the house to tell my mom it was throbbing again and next thing I knew her jaw dropped, and her cell phone slipped out of her hand. Half my face was paralyzed. On our way to chop we went, we packed the house, got in the car and drove a long, fearful ride to Children`s hospital. As we pulled out of the driveway, I found myself looking back at the house, I had an uneasy feeling in my stomach, not knowing at the time that would be my last summer as a normal kid.

I knew something was wrong, not only could I feel it inside of me but for the first time in my

life, I could see the fear on my parents' faces. When we arrived at CHOP there were non stop doctors, and nurses in and out of my room. It felt like forever, test after test they could not seem to find out why my face was paralyzed or why my ear was throbbing all day long. Suddenly a nurse and a doctor entered the room and I was filled with a little hope. They were going to fix what was wrong and we were going to be on our way back to the shore. Then my parents were pulled outside of the room, and I thought to myself, how come they could not tell me what was wrong. A few minutes passed and then they returned with tears filling their eyes. My little bit of hope was gone, everything in that very moment was gone. Life stopped and the word just kept replaying, over and over in my head, cancer. I had cancer.

I was diagnosed with ALL Leukemia that summer of 2015. I was eleven and I had cancer. I was just getting ready to begin a new chapter of life middle school; dances, braces, field hockey, and friends. I didn't realize until I was being wheeled down to the ICU that a little more than just school was going to be taken away from me. Cancer meant everything was different. Cancer meant I was going to have to shave my head, leave my friends, and transition every day into a daily fight. Every day I would now have to fight for my life, fight to win. The only thing left that I was certain of there was no giving up.

The hospital became my new home, they had to start chemo right away. Everything began so fast from the moment I was diagnosed, and it only got harder. I received chemo every day twice a day for a month. Then it became more weekly with monthly spinal taps. The day that I was dreading the most came too fast. My hair....it was starting to fall out. I asked my hairdresser to come to the hospital one day after chemo, to cut my hair. She cut it shoulder-length so it was easier to fall out with treatment. A few short weeks after my mom had to shave it for me and just like that, I was bald. It was a daily reminder that I was sick but I got used to it, besides, I rocked bald!

Days at the hospital became weeks, weeks became months and months turned into two long years of an everyday battle against myself to stay alive. Through it all I remained positive, we all did. It took my whole family by surprise, but my two best friends Hannah and Jason kept me smiling. I was lucky enough to have two older siblings by my side the whole time, playing games, visiting me and cheering me on. I lost a lot of weight and I was weak but I knew for sure I was not going to give up. The following summer I began daily radiation treatments on my brain. Finally, after two long years, I was cancer-free, and it was the time I had dreamed about for so long. It was time to ring the bell, I was wheeled into the waiting room where my parents and siblings sat cheering me on. I rang that bell with pride and joy, cancer was behind me and I had finally won. I was ready to pick up where I left off and live life without cancer, so I thought.

My first fearful trip to CHOP, unfortunately, was not the last. I was in the back seat of the car on my way to CHOP for my monthly spinal tap. I was sitting in a cold room and the doctors were running tests. I got my spinal tap but something was off, my doctor and mom were acting strange. We drove home and my parents sat me on the couch, with the same face of fear they had two years ago. It was now August of 2017 and I was in remission, my hair just started growing back and I was playing sports again. As I sat on the couch life stopped again. The same word repeated over and over in my head, cancer. It was back. I was fourteen and I had cancer again, but this time it was different, it was worse, and I was going to war.

Chemo and radiation were not going to be enough for me this time. It was back and it was spreading even faster. My doctors told us that I would need a bone marrow transplant. The first step would be to find a donor, someone to match my bone marrow. My parents and siblings were all tested to see if they could be possible donors. The tests were in and we found out that Hannah, my older sister was a match. Not only was she a match but she was a perfect match, 10/10! She was

going to be my donor.

At the time Hannah was nineteen, and she was starting her first year at Drexel University after receiving a full scholarship to play basketball. She was just starting the season when she had to tell her coaches that she would need some time off from the games, practices, and workouts to save my life. I was now fourteen, having been through numerous chemo treatments, radiation, spinal taps, basically, you name it and I got it. I was tired but I was ready. Ready to get rid of this once and for all, ready to beat cancer for the second and final time.

The date was November ninth, Hannah was admitted to the hospital with my mom by her side. I was in room 314 with the rest of my family sitting patiently waiting for Hannah to be out of surgery. She was put under, while bone marrow was being taken out of both of her hips. The whole procedure took about 2 hours. After, she went to recovery and was released and her and my mom came to my room. We were all there. It was time. A minister came in to bless the bone marrow and they hooked me up, it took around 5-6 hours. Everyone sat around me watching it trickle down from the tube into my fragile body.

After being in the hospital for almost 2 months with a lot of ups and downs the bone marrow transplant was a success! I was able to come home a couple days before Christmas. It was the best present ever. It was a quick recovery for Hannah, a week after giving her bone marrow she was back starting in her first college game. Hannah and I aren't just sisters, we are best friends. We have a special bond that most sisters do not have and I will be eternally grateful to her. Sitting at her games today, I think about how lucky I am. I look at life from a different perspective, every moment is precious. It warms my heart that in these long 4 years of battling through this, that I have touched so many people with my story. Hoping to give strength and encouragement to never give up, because cancer dared to try and I dared to win.