



## 2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

# Thomas Butts

### Uncle Bill

My Uncle Bill was larger than life. Never a boisterous man but a humble, caring person who did not have to say much to show you that he cared. He was an All-American man; a military man who loved his baby—a large plane that he worked on for nearly four decades as a mechanic for the Federation Aviation Association. He loved his Harley Davidson and he loved America. He always sported a beard that reminded me of Santa Claus. He volunteered as a firefighter for years after his own father dropped dead of a heart attack after rescuing a family of five from their burning house on his way to work leaving my Uncle Bill, 24 years old, the oldest sibling of a family of eight.

My Uncle Bill was like a grandfather to me. He called me “Little Man”. He gave my mother away at her wedding when her own father, a dysfunctional alcoholic, could not be found. He drove 400 miles from New Jersey to Pittsburgh to escort my mom in the middle of a football game as she was pronounced homecoming queen. Quite simply, he was everything to my family. A strong, loving model of a man. He showed me what it means to be a good person, to value family, to love wholeheartedly.

My Uncle Bill was diagnosed with Hepa-Cellular Carcinoma this past fall of 2019. He sought out treatment, settling on specialists at the University of Pennsylvania, praying that their expertise and treatment would allow him many more years with my family. We talked about my upcoming graduation and he told me often how much he was looking forward to seeing me walk and how proud he was of the kind of person I had become, not knowing how directly he impacted my development.

Unfortunately, in early February 2020, we were unexpectedly blindsided when we took him for immunotherapy and were told that instead of receiving treatment, we were being sent home to watch him die. The news was devastating—he was in liver failure and there was nothing that anyone could do to help. I begged and pleaded, prayed to God for some solution, spent hours online with naïve optimism that comes with being only 17 years old, that I could find another person or treatment that would help.

I drove to New Jersey to be with my uncle and his family. I held his hand and through tears, he told me he was not afraid to die. That he had had a good life. That he was so proud of me. Every day, he deteriorated a bit more, going from the strong man I have always known to a weak and sick man. Towards the end, he held my hand and told me to always look up at the sky and know that he would be looking down on me, an angel in death as he has been in life, caring from me from afar.

My uncle passed away, at home, surrounded by all the people he loved so much on February 28, 2020. I am so grateful that I had an opportunity to tell him how much he was loved but I still feel so robbed. Why, in a day and age when we can take a heart valve out of a pig and put it in the chest of a human, can we not cure this insidious disease? Why couldn't the love we felt for him have been enough to beat this?

I will always miss my Uncle Bill, his smile, his sincerity, his humor, his altruistic and gentle demeanor. I hope to become half the man that he was. I hope to give to others without keeping score. I hope to live a long and happy life and yet, I am scared now. Scared of this disease. Scared that it could strike me down in the prime of my life. I do not take life for granted now. I will give my all to helping others and as I near graduation, I will miss his presence that much more.

In these uncertain times more than ever, I know the importance of finding a cure to not only cancer but to other diseases. I am pursuing a degree in medicine for that very reason--to bring peace and hope to families, like mine, who are delivered devastating news. I want to be a part of the solution. I want my uncle to look down from heaven knowing that his death from cancer will not define him but that perhaps, it inspired another generation of hope. Like my uncle, I don't care about fame or money but I do care about finding a cure so that no other families need to feel the pain and loss that we are all feeling right now.