2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

**1st Place Winner**

June Haflett

Beauty of Loss

Cancer is a beautiful thing. I can guarantee you’ve never heard a doctor say that, but it’s true. When you think of cancer, you think of death, sickness, and unhappy endings. Hopefully my story will convince you to think otherwise.

There was a boy who lived down the street from me; his name was Dominic. I used to see him walking in my neighborhood. He walked with his head held high, a skip in his step, and a glimmer in his eyes. His dark brown hair never took away from his seemingly permanent smile. He was one year behind me in school, so I never had classes with him, but I saw him in the hallways. I never knew him too well, and he probably never noticed me. But, in March of 2016 he was diagnosed with Glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer. I still remember the way I felt when given this information. My heart was pounding, and I could hear the unsteady rhythm getting louder. My body flinched at every pulse. Once again, I remembered Dominic’s dark brown hair, and how it would no longer sit upon his head. I shut my eyes and clasped my hands together in prayer that his smile would remain. I felt my heart skip a beat as I realized that the world was no longer a place of wonder. That night, I asked my mom about the diagnosis.

“What’s going to happen to Dominic?” I implored. I could see the precariousness on her face.

“I’m not sure,” she offered, but her answer did not satisfy me. I was trapped in a trance of uncertainty, thinking about the events to come.

I could not process that something so unfortunate could happen to someone so young. In that moment, this stranger became an inspiration to me, and he was someone I wanted to fight for. I started to raise money with my friends, and after countless lemonade stands and saved allowances, I eventually made 300 dollars. My ten-year-old self couldn’t tell the difference between 300 dollars and a million dollars. A sense of pride carried me down the magical isles of my local superstore as I picked out more toys than my little arms could carry. I spent the money on gadgets, gloves, hats, clothes, and sanitary items, and donated it all to Toys for Tots in Dominic’s name. I kept him in my thoughts for the next couple months, his story influencing everything I did. He crept into my mind every time I was feeling unmotivated or overwhelmed. He inspired me to act out of kindness, and to help others in need. I taught people how to make bracelets at recess so that they could sell them and make their own money to donate to Dominic. Helping him brought me joy, as if I played a part in his legendary story. Dominic had so many people fighting for him. There were fundraisers, events, and spirit days which raised awareness and money to support him. Alongside my community, I fought for Dominic, and he never even knew my name.

On December 7th, 2016, my 4th grade teacher announced to my class that Dominic was no longer with us. I felt my heart sink and my lungs gasp for air. My brain went blank, as if my body was restarting. He’s only 8, I thought, his young face appearing in my mind. People in my class were crying, but my heart could not process the loss. I sat in silence for the rest of the day, trying to understand how something this cruel could have happened.

Two years later, I sat in a rusty folding chair in the gymnasium of my elementary school, finally being promoted to middle school. The rubbery floor muffled the sound of footsteps as parents took their seats and students chattered about their summer plans. I thought about Dominic, and how he would never get to experience this feeling of accomplishment. Although his story affected me, it had become more of a memory. Still, my eyes started to water when I saw Dominic’s mom step on the stage. She started to talk about an award that she and her family would give in Dominic’s name.

“We want to honor someone who shows Dominic’s traits of perseverance, courage, and kindness,” she said, the words echoing throughout the gym. Tall speakers faced the audience, projecting her words from all directions.

She stood with her head held high, surrounded by her husband, her other son, and a community who loves her. Her eyes scanned the audience, taking in the tremendous crowd who sat in front of her, but stood by her side. She looked right at me, and I saw her lips mouth my name. It traveled into the microphone, a bunch of letters and syllables that represented me. I heard the speakers project it across the sea of people, waiting for me to approach the stage. My legs peeled off the chair, the early June heat causing them to stick. My feet carried me to the stage, and it was not until I looked out into the crowd that I understood. All of these people watching me had gone through the same thing I did. They watched this undeserving boy go through so much pain and lose his battle. They learned from him, loved him, and fought for him, just like I did. Although devastating, his story brought our community together. I stood under the fluorescent lights, in front of everyone, feeling so proud that I got to represent Dominic’s army and the battle we fought for him. I knew I wasn’t winning an award for myself, but for everyone in this crowd. The applause could not overpower the feeling of pride and gratitude that filled my body, lifting me up but grounding me all at once.

When I said cancer was beautiful, I did not lie. Despite the tragic loss of a beautiful soul, our community gained an irreplaceable bond. We went through a loss as one big family, and because of that our bond only became stronger. We know that we have each other’s backs, the way we all had Dominic’s. Although I wish he was still with us today, he improved our community with his journey. I believe it is important for everyone to hear his story and see the beauty that hides behind loss.