2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

**1st Place Winner**

Juniper Sowden

My Cancer Experience

On February 13, 2017, my life changed. I was a normal 7-year-old with a normal life. My mom worked at a preschool and my dad had a gardening business. My little sister was 5. That night, something odd happened. My mom and dad said we had to have a talk. My heart fell through the floor. Thinking I had done something wrong, I started to cry. My dad said that he was sick. To my seven-year-old self that meant something short-term like a cold or flu, but what it really was, was cancer. Stage 4 non-small cell lung cancer that had spread to his arm, brain, and liver to be exact. I was confused, and a little worried. I knew he would be okay though because to a seven-year-old there is always a happy ending.

About 4 months later my dad needed brain surgery. I had started to understand more about what this disease was. I had talked to friends, guidance counselors, group leaders, therapists, and every type of children's psychology expert that has ever existed. I was an anxious little girl, always concerned that my dad would drop dead from this “cancer”. He went to Philadelphia. My mom had explained to me that the doctors were taking a chunk of brain out of my dad. To me, brain surgery sounded like a Frankenstein operation, removing and replacing various body parts. He had his surgery and it went well. He came home a little different. He had these train-track-like staples across his scar. After the surgery, he started taking targeted therapy. I would tell my friends “It's called Chemo! Except chemo is kind of dumb. IT eats all the cells! The good ones, and the bad ones.” My dad could no longer work. My world was kind of tipped upside down.

When I told my fellow second graders about my dad's surgery, many of them were confused. Everyone my age thought cancer was a short-term illness. My dad got chemotherapy for years. I can remember spending afternoons in the hospital parking lot. One year, my sister and I took our zoom classes in the hospital parking lot. I remember when my dad would text my mom that he would be out in a few minutes. This took hours! My sister and I created games to escape from the scary reality that our dad couldn’t fight this forever. As I grew up with cancer in my life I began to realize that there is not always a happy ending. Perhaps this is just growing up, but when my friends began to lose their loved ones to cancer I began to wonder if cancer would take my dad.

He had radiation 7 times. I would sleep over at my grandmother's house. He would leave for the city early in the morning. When I went to school I would bring a picture of my dad. I would look out onto my class of “normal” elementary schoolers and think “They don’t understand. They will never understand. They don’t have my dad.” And I was right. I missed out on sports with my dad. I have to see my teammates high-five their dads, and watch everyone celebrate holidays, share memories and spend time with their dads, while I’m left with my (now) family of three.

It’s difficult to adjust to little things after losing a family member to a disease. Quiet nights, holidays, more responsibilities, no more afternoons in the hospital parking lots, no more explaining what cancer is to my classmates, realizing there aren’t always happy endings. So when cancer rattles your life, find your true friends and your true hobbies. Hold out hope, but understand that there aren’t always happy endings.