2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

**2nd Place Winner**

Daniel Burke

Why I Hate Cancer More Than Anything

Let me introduce myself, I am a twelve year old boy living in center city Philadelphia with my little sister, my Mom, and Dad. We enjoy going on hikes, traveling, having outdoor adventures and hanging out with friends. We are big foodies. We seem just like any normal family except that both my Mom and my Dad have cancer.

 My Mom was diagnosed with Stage II Breast Cancer in October of 2019. We were all devastated by the grim news. My sister broke into tears because at the age of five she thought that if you had cancer you would die. I had to hold back the tears and be strong for my sister so that she didn’t become more frightened than she already was. Luckily the doctors caught the cancer early, so after surgeries and radiation, we were hopeful. The treatments she had to go through were painful but she prevailed because of her strong body and even stronger will.

My mom and I have always been very connected. She always reads books with me, we love to hike and bike. I taught her how to fish and play chess. She and my dad coached my baseball team and she was always volunteering at my school. All of these memories helped strengthen our connection. After a year of treatment my mom is now in remission and cancer free. Although she still takes medication and gets infusions, it’s preventative. We celebrate her victory over breast cancer and even though I’m happy she is healthy, I sometimes get a happy-sad feeling. The sadness comes from the fact that my mom had to suffer through harsh surgeries and treatment. This is another reason I hate cancer more than anything.

 Immediately after my mom finished her radiation treatment we went into lockdown due to the COVID pandemic. Just when we thought things couldn’t get any worse, we got news that my dad had also had cancer. In August of 2020 he was diagnosed with stage IV Lung cancer. We were all in complete shock, because my dad never got so much as the sniffles. He wasn’t a smoker and never vaped. My dad was in great physical condition as well. One night my family was watching “World of Dance.” There was a contestant, and his wife had stage IV cancer. The couple found out that she didn’t have long to live. Because of this I thought that all people who were diagnosed with stage IV cancer were destined to die. This scared me to no end. But luckily there is a groundbreaking medicine called Tagrisso that has helped my dad live a semi-normal life the past two years. My mom reassured me that the stage is how doctors determine the type of treatment for patients.

My parents go to Abramson Cancer Center, it is one of the best hospitals in the country, and since we live so close to it, I feel better about my dad’s cancer care. I know he is in great hands at Penn’s treatment center. However hard cancer has been, we refuse to back down and be melancholy. Our family has chosen strength over fear. Instead of hiding from our problems we make the most of our difficult situation. With the connections my parents have in the food and wine industry because of their careers, they found a way to bring people together to raise awareness and money for lung cancer research. My mom founded TAG Time Happy Hour, a fundraising campaign which became a movement throughout Philadelphia and raised over 100,000 dollars in two months for research to improve the situations of EGFR lung cancer patients like my dad. Dealing with cancer requires emotional and physical support from your trusted friends and family. My parents give my sister and me an open space to talk and ask questions. I also talk with a social worker from the hospital where my parents receive treatment. Therapy is wonderful because it allows you private space to talk openly without judgment. My take away from this experience is that cancer sucks and nobody wants the terrible disease. But it doesn’t mean you have to go through it alone and although everyday might be hard, not every day is bad. At the end of the day my dad is on the road to beat cancer, where he can see my mom at the finish line cheering him on every step of the way.