2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

**2nd Place Winner**

Rose West

Finding Beauty Amongst Broken Pieces

I was on the brink of thirteen when the world paused and shattered around me. Everything I had ever experienced was obscured by the enormity of a diagnosis I had only known from medical dramas, and a disability my only experience with was from figures of speech.

Six months of peculiar symptoms reached a climax. In hindsight, I was checking off all the diagnostic boxes. They were boxes which I had never thought to consider. After all, I was only in seventh grade, and my priorities consisted of convincing my mom to let me use her laptop and figuring out pre-algebra problems, not contemplating whether the confusing, unexplainable sensations I was experiencing were caused by a brain tumor.

Everything started with a heartbeat sound in my ears. One day it simply appeared, and it wouldn’t go away. Day in and day out, an endless ‘thadump-thadump-thadump.” It was ominous and irritating and echoed entirely inside my head. No matter how much I scraped my eardrums raw with cotton swabs, took ear infection antibiotics, and complained and complained it persisted. Yet humans survive through adaptability. In the miraculous way anything becomes normal after a long enough time, I got used to it. The heartbeat sound blended into the usual cacophony of background noise characteristic of daily life. It was never gone, but easy enough to ignore.

What was harder to ignore was the sweeping lightheadedness and kaleidoscope of colors that obstructed my vision every time I stood. The head rushes began briefly, few and far between. As time passed they intensified, becoming constant. I tried to power through: stabilizing myself with whatever was nearby, pressing my palms to my eyes in a vain attempt to force relief. However. what started as inconvenient lightheadedness had become an overwhelming, terrifying dizzy spell I could not shake off.

I was too young to have the words to describe what I was experiencing: vertigo and floaters had never been descriptors for any of the seasonal viruses I had before. I didn’t feel sick—just wrong. As a child such a feeling was daunting. Confusion and fear clouded my rationality, and I made nervous excuses to my parents and teachers whenever they asked if I was feeling alright. It seems melodramatic now that I’m older, but I genuinely assumed that I was losing my mind. After all, everything I was experiencing was intangible, and it all felt like it was happening inside my head.

Soon enough, I lost the ability to focus my eyes. I couldn’t make sight of things right in front of me. Whenever I tried to read, the letters would shift and morph. I began to tactically avoid reading in class and nervously laughed my stumbling and confusion off on clumsiness. I knew something was incredibly wrong, but I was so afraid. I didn’t want to be insane, I didn’t want to be sent away. None of it was right, but my fear of what exactly could be wrong kept me quiet.

It took paralysis in the left side of my face for me to finally tell my parents what was happening. I remember their stunned, contemplative silence as they took in everything I explained. My skin itched with the weight of what was unspoken. We met with my pediatrician, and we discussed Lyme disease and anxiety. I was eased by the familiar, easier to stomach terms. Just in case, however, my doctor referred me to a neurologist—the appointment of which I never attended.

Three days before I would have met the neurologist, December 10th, 2016, I lost sight in my right eye. It was like a switch being turned off. I blinked and could no longer see. The illusion of childhood officially began to break. I yelled and sobbed and hyperventilated, moving my hand over my eyes in a vague attempt to make sense of what was happening to me.

I went to an emergency room and had my first MRI. They found a large mass in the back of my head. I was transferred to the local Children’s Hospital, and less than forty-eight hours later I was in surgery. The in-patient stay was exactly four weeks long. It was filled with oncology examinations, eye appointments, physical rehabilitation therapies and my emotions fluctuating on a spectrum: from numbness to fitful breakdowns. Shortly after being discharged, I started proton radiation. It lasted thirty-three sessions before I went into remission. All the while the hope was that my vision would improve. Iit never did, in fact it only got worse. I have been left functionally blind, with no sight in my right eye and no peripheral vision in my left eye. I only have a small speck of central vision, which is so small it is inefficient to even use.

My world had totally shattered. I lost trust of my own body and mind, and my youthful innocence was abruptly forced into a maturity I was not ready to handle. I lost my vision, something which I had taken for granted. The possibility of losing it was so foreign it never could have crossed my mind. Brain cancer didn’t seem to just be something that randomly happened to people, and yet it happened to me with no rhyme or reason. I was angry, hurting, grieving, traumatized- it has been five years and some days I still am.

However, I’ve learned life never stops moving forward. Cancer broke me into a thousand ineffable pieces, but broken things don’t have to stay broken. With love and support, time and determination, even the most shattered people can heal. In millions of unexpected ways, my cancer has managed to bring beauty and fulfillment into my life.

So many of my favorite people I never would have met if I never had been sick: my teachers, who have supported me in both my blindness and interests, and the amazing friends I have met at camps for those with pediatric cancer and visual impairments. I never would have grown into the person I am now if I had never been sick; I would have missed out on millions of personal lessons, sprinkled with both laughter and tears. I have gotten to see the best in people, from strangers showing support in my time of need to finding mentors who want to watch me thrive despite some of my sharp, shattered pieces. So many tender, joyful memories would never exist without my brain cancer, and a world lacking that love and warmth in my life is not worth it even if it is one where I can see.

Blindness has undeniably been hard to adjust to, but I have been able to replace my eyes with my ears, hands, and voice. I used to love to draw and paint, and though I sometimes miss it, I have found a new passion in music. I am able to express myself with piano chords and lyrics instead of lines and colors. My disability has also taught me to advocate for myself, and I have developed a love of public speaking and educating others about health and accessibility. Blindness has given me initiative and motivation to change how I look at the world, and I want to use the insight I obtain to encourage others to do the same.

Cancer is not something I would have chosen, but I actively make the choice to keep living despite it. I was a child who grew up too fast, and I still am dealing with the emotional ramifications of my sickness and the permanent implications it has on my life. This is my life however, and I choose how to define it. Yes, many days I still grieve and yell and feel broken beyond belief, but many other days are filled with smiles and hilariously bad jokes and gratitude and joy and peace. I exist as all my shattered pieces, and every raw emotion and blessing is part of who I am, and I keep living with gratitude for the chance to learn who I will become.