2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

**3rd Place Winner**

Courtney Rittler

My Unexpected

October 25 2009. This date may not have value to most, but for my family it was one of the most impactful days of our lives. That is the date my father was diagnosed with cancer. My father, a man at the age of forty four with two daughters and a wife. With so much time left, I received some of the worst news a person could get. My dad has skin cancer, and chronic lymphocytic leukemia, or CIL for short. I was born in March of 2009, so it has always felt that I was the start of his cancer.

Fast forward 11 years, January 23 2021, 58 days of non-stop fevers and pain. My mom rushed him to the hospital. My father was in the hospital for ten days, with a fever reaching 105.9°F. My sister, mom and I receive gifts, and meals daily. Prayers left and right, and empathetic looks at every corner. This was not the first time he was rushed to the hospital, but the most recent of three occasions. But this was in fact the first time that I ever seriously considered my father’s death. What it would be like without his fantastic cooking, his cunning and sarcastic jokes, his everlasting flow of knowledge, and most of all his humorous personality. So when thinking about me never experiencing any of that or not having him walk me down the aisle when I’m older. Tears ran like streams down my face at the thought of it. He was sick, and I had felt it first-hand, for the first time. So sick to the point my mother sat me and my sister down crying, telling us that at any minute our lives could change forever. At any minute my father could be taken from us. Cancer could take him.

It was looking really bad for him. My mom is the most hopeful and optimistic person I know and even she had a look in her eye that I had never seen before. A look that made me think I needed to say goodbye, so I wouldn’t regret it before it was too late. One of the worst parts of it all, was that while he was in the hospital me nor my sister could go see him. When it looked worst for him, our last time seeing him could have been him getting dragged out of the house and rushed to the hospital. It hurt. Keeping in mind, at the time it was mid COVID. My dad was in the hospital for pneumonia, then after being in the hospital- a place filled with people with known COVID cases- he got COVID. So my dad was in the hospital with cancer and COVID-pneumonia. And for every one he needed different medications. And- just to our luck- each medication he took, had a negative impact on the others he was taking. So he just got worse. Worse than he already was. Difficult to imagine right? Not too hard to imagine when living through it.

My dad survived. I know that is not the answer for most family members. So I am so thankful for the fact that it can be mine. Thank the lord he survived. Literally. One of the only reasons my dad is still here today is due to “the power of prayer.” We got so many prayers, from family, friends, even strangers, and because of those prayers he survived. Now I have lived with my “sick dad” my entire life. But let me tell you one thing. Just because he has cancer does not mean he isn’t the best father, friend, husband, brother, and person anyone could ever know. He is the best thing I could ever ask for. I write this, with the hope that people love and use the time they have with people before it is gone. Because the truth is, and will always be, that life is short. Shorter for some than others, and you may never get a chance to say goodbye. So use your time with the people you love to the fullest.