2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Analiese Gramo

My Popop

Cancer will drain your body until it is left with nothing. It is like a war; you have your enemy, cancer, and your Allies, medical staff, but no one ever really wins. Although no cancers are good, there is a wide spectrum. Some cancers are untreatable, and some are treatable. Cancer isn't just about how hard you fight, it's about the journey.

Back in early 2013, my popop was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Since he was a young man, he had worked on navy ships as a pipefitter. The ships were filled with asbestos which can cause a type of cancer called mesothelioma. This allowed citizens to do many dangerous long-term activities.

In mid-2013, my popop had become weaker and weaker. His body began to fail but his spirit had not. He could no longer take my cousins and me water skiing or let me sit in his lap while he drove the boat, but his company was all I needed. The hospital attempted to remove one lung, but after a 4-hour surgery, they realized the cancer had already metastasized. They decided to leave the lung in and start him on chemotherapy. Eventually, he was put on an oxygen tank and started to have trouble completing everyday tasks. He slept most of the time, but when he was awake, his presence made everything better. He had kind eyes and a cheerful smile that could light up the room. He was always very friendly and helpful to others. Unless, of course, you interrupted his baseball game. But I loved all the things about him whether they were good or bad.

When my popop was diagnosed, I was only six or seven. I wasn't too young where I was blissfully ignorant, but I wasn't old enough to understand it all. Luckily, I don't remember all of the bad parts, but I do remember one.

Every summer my family and I would go up to our lake house. We knew Popop wasn't doing too well, so we tried to go up as much as we could. It was July 2013, and the sun was beaming through the windows. Sprightly birds chirped from the trees and waves from boats crashed against our dock. My popop had been watching the Phillies game like he normally did when I went to sit with him. Everything was nice and calm; all you could hear was the air conditioner vigorously blowing cool air and the announcers droning on the tv. My mom was trying to learn how to knit a scarf, quietly moving her needles, but it was looking horrendous.

I looked at Poppop. He looked like he was having trouble catching his breath.  Suddenly, I saw his trembling hands gripping the chair trying to steady himself. My mother flew into action. She quickly rushed out of her chair and made her way over to my popop. She yelled into the other room to get my nana's attention. My nana frantically searched for her phone and scurried over to the living room. I sat there in silence with my eyes glued straight open. When my nana saw that I was sitting there, she swiftly but kindly got me up and took me onto the porch. She wanted to hold me back from the traumatizing event. I could hear the sirens in the distance getting closer and closer. I sat with my legs swinging underneath the chair with a fog across my mind. Birds still chirped, waves still crashed, and the sun still beamed through the windows. Nothing had changed, life went on as if nothing had happened.

A couple of days later Popop arrived home from the hospital. He needed lots of time to rest and restore his energy. Eventually, things got better, and he was able to do small everyday things again, but this didn't last long. On February 10th, he was hospitalized. I was in school the day we found out. My mom booked a plane ticket to fly down to Florida to be with him for his last moments, and I vividly remember running up the driveway to give my mom a book I made for him. When I ran into her room, she was already unpacking her suitcase. Unfortunately, his body was not strong enough to take in oxygen and succumbed to cancer.

Cancer is a war that not all can win. It puts families and relationships through traumatic events and deeply affects the mental and physical health of yourself and others. Although cancer won, he is in a better place watching over the people he loves.