2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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A Story That Gave Me No Choice

Cancer. The word that has haunted my life since before I even knew the meaning of it. Cancer. The thing that has tried over and over again to tear me down. Cancer. A word that carries far more weight to me than most people will ever realize.

Cancer has been a part of my life since I was 3 years old and my brother was only 9 months. A yearly check-up with his pediatrician revealed that his innocent baby pot belly was hiding something far more sinister. A series of long, stressful doctor’s appointments at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia revealed that my dear baby brother had hepatoblastoma, a type of liver cancer. He had to have a large surgery to remove 75% of his liver and endured 6 rounds of chemotherapy. My parents were forced to carry the full weight of this diagnosis alone, both still young parents working 9 to 5 jobs. I would grow up happily, not to remember any of this.

At 10 years old, I still had no real understanding of the horrible disease that had almost claimed my brother. All I knew was that he had just recently hit 5 years of remission: the point at which a cancer survivor is considered cured. Then, right before my brother was to enter 2nd grade and I 4th, something happened. He had a few intense headaches and came down with a violent stomach bug. Our pediatrician wasn’t overly concerned, even though he was still getting sick two weeks later, but my mom was really worried. She made an appointment for my brother to see a CHOP specialist. He went in on Thursday and was rushed to surgery Friday morning. My parents were both there with him and I was quickly carted off to my uncle’s house. I did not see my brother again until Sunday afternoon and at that point, he was no longer the highly energetic, funny little brother I had known. Seeing him laying in a bed that looked entirely too large for him, with tubes and wires everywhere and a huge incision on the back of his head is something I will never forget. It was at this moment that I realized just how horrifying cancer was.

After what felt like forever, we finally got the results from pathology. My brother was diagnosed with medulloblastoma, a brain cancer. This was devastating. Justin had to go through 30 days of radiation and 9 rounds of aggressive chemo. He lost his hair many times and his energy suffered greatly, never to recover completely. My family was struggling. It was so much harder for my parents to face this monster a second time, and my brother and I were older and much more aware. Thankfully, my mother had gotten a job working from home with flexible hours, so she was the one to take my brother to all of his radiation, chemo, MRI, and other appointments. My father stayed home and worked so that we would still have a source of income. I was left out: still too young to fully comprehend. My parents were struggling under the burden of a nightmare I barely understood.

It was at this point in time that we found the Cancer Support Community of Greater Philadelphia, more commonly known as Gilda’s Club. Everyone there was a tremendous help and undoubtedly the reason my family was able to make it through. My parents attended monthly support group meetings with many other parents going through the same thing, while my brother and I did the same with children our age. All four of us made friends there, many of whom we are still close with today. CSCGP was quite literally a life saver. The monthly meetings helped all of us cope with and come to terms with what was happening, which was something I desperately needed.

Thanks to Gilda’s, we came out of my brother’s treatment still in one piece, and we have done our best to remain that way to this day. We were united by our shared struggle and ability to rely on one another. My school was also an amazing help, allowing me to talk to faculty with similar experiences and even doing some fundraising when my brother was selected to be an ambassador for CHOP. About half a year after my brother finished treatment, we got to take a family Make-A-Wish trip to Disney World. It was an absolutely stress free and amazing experience that I know nothing will ever quite compare to. All these amazing people and experiences were so helpful to our family and we were ready to start giving back to the community and helping others. We were ready to move on and put all of our heartache and suffering behind us.

Unfortunately, it turns out that our battle was not yet over. In early 2019, my mother had an unusual spot come up on a routine scan. The results came back with a chilling discovery: my mom had stage 4 adenocarcinoma, a type of colorectal cancer. This diagnosis was absolutely heartbreaking and flipped our life completely upside down. We were completely in denial. How was this happening again?

Watching my mother go through chemotherapy is something I will never forget. Her hair never fell out like Justin’s did, but she was bedridden for days while that awful liquid was pumped into her. My amazingly dedicated mother and matriarch of our family, the one who had always taken care of Justin and I when we were sick, was suddenly so unwell she didn’t even have enough energy to get downstairs. Because of this, I had to become much more controlled and organized, to compensate for what my mother could not do. This took a tremendous toll on me. I was only in my first year of middle school, yet I was shouldering a tremendous burden. I was forced to mature far quicker than any other kid my age.

Twelve painstakingly slow chemotherapy treatments later, my mother was ready for surgery. The procedure took hours. My mother had multiple organs removed, but they finally found the location of her initial tumor and removed all the cancer from her body. Everything seemed to be going alright: my mom’s surgery was successful, she was recovering, and we now had much more hope. Still, my mother was weak and unwell. She had to spend an extra 2 weeks in the hospital and missed Justin’s and my first day of school, which was hard for all of us. Finally, she got to come home. We weren’t done though as my mother still had to endure radiation. We pushed through this, but just barely.

My entire life, as far back as I can remember, has been one fight after another. My mother, brother, and I all share an incurable genetic disease called Familial Adenomatous Polyposis, which was diagnosed shortly after my brother’s first cancer battle. FAP causes a heightened chance of cancer and tumors (though it doesn’t always strike as hard as it has hit us). With this knowledge constantly lingering in my mind, it is impossible not to feel as if I am being followed by a large black cloud, always waiting for the next big health crisis to hit us. My mom and brother’s cancer diagnoses have only succeeded in making me far more wary and aware of my own risks, which can be daunting. I do, however, know that I will always have my community behind me for whatever my future may contain, and that is comforting. Gilda’s Club has been a source of constant support ever since the first day we stepped foot in the club house. I will be forever grateful for all the kindness and compassion shown to me in my darkest times, and I have done my best to provide that for all the new families that came after mine by volunteering wherever I can. It’s hard to live a life so darkened by cancer, but helping others makes it a little easier to bear and brings back some light into my world.

Cancer will always be part of my life, but I will not let it consume me. One of my favorite quotes is “behind every strong person is a story that gave them no choice”. People love to tell my family that we are so strong, but it was never a choice. We had to develop the strength to handle all of the obstacles that life has thrown at us or they could have destroyed us. I don’t have much control on how deeply FAP will affect my future, but organizations like CSCGP have helped me to find my strength, and I know my closest friends and family will always be there to help me shoulder the burden if it gets too heavy for me to handle on my own.