2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Cyrus Patel

What is Cancer to me?

What is cancer to me? From a logical and scientific perspective, cancer is a disease in which there is uncontrollable cell growth in an area of the body that has the potential to invade other areas of the body and destroy body tissue. As an eight-year-old boy, cancer was just one of the astrological signs that my mother was obsessed over. My dad was born in June, and I clearly remember her saying I was a Virgo and dad was cancer. When I was told that she had cancer, the concept simply went over my head and into the garbage.

I was told that she was just sick and that she needed to go to the hospital for a little while; days turned into months and months turned into years, and I was still clueless. I was just a little kid who laughed and played at school and then went to the hospital some days to see my mother in a decrepit state. She never told me she was dying, but I had the sense that everything would be alright.

Since I have grown up, I reflect on the true damage that cancer has done. Not only has it caused lifelong suffering for my mother, but cancer took away integral parts of my youth. Instead of watching TV shows and playing games, my mother was fighting to stay alive while I had no clue what was going on.

Over the course of a couple months my mom’s condition improved every now and then, and she was allowed to come home for a little bit. Shortly after this, my dad got into a near-fatal motorcycle accident and came home on a hospital bed, and I was still in the phase where I could not truly process difficult events. I just remember having to wear gloves and help my grandfather give him some shots or take food upstairs to my mom.

With two parents hospitalized, it was demoralizing to walk into the hospital seeing both parents incapacitated, and I was truly uncertain over their lives. As time went on and I was getting older, my worries were relieved by my grandfather. Not only did he step into the role of being my primary caretaker, but he was nonchalant about the situation which transferred on to me. He also had me filled with activities to get my mind off everything; he was the personal Uber driver who escorted me to these activities as well. I remember the days he taught us about Swahili and his early Kenyan origins; I remember the days he would take us to the restaurant close to our karate dojo and pour extra salt on my fries. I remember him trying to make me understand the grueling math in Kumon. Each morning would be filled with our tea creating time and we would laugh over breakfast. We also walked to school together; I ran ahead of him as he calmly paced forward with his hands behind his back. All of these efforts helped alleviate my stress and did not allow me to process that something was wrong.

There are a countless of complex negative emotions that are experienced when the news of cancer gets out, and I was fortunate enough to have my grandfather to help me bear through this tough time. He made sure I did not pursue any detrimental pathways and he made my life normal. With all the fear, sadness, and other emotions, he truly changed my life to have a positive attitude which helped me for the better.

Although cancer is a very devastating thing to hear, especially with someone you know, sitting in sadness makes things worse. Even though I was just a boy, I lived life to fullest, just like my parents would have wanted. Fortunately, they are both still here to catch up on the time lost being a family.

And despite the fact that cancer is a terrible thing, the lessons that you can learn from it are unlike any other. The journey was long, but cancer teaches you to be optimistic, independent, and strong. It also teaches you to cherish those around you and live life to the fullest since cancer is random – it can affect anyone at any time. I am lucky enough that my experience was not severely affected by the sorrow involved with cancer, and even though he is no longer here today, I thank my grandfather for making it be that way. To this day, everyone remembers him and asks about him. He unfortunately passed in 2020 and I miss him dearly. It was not until then, I truly processed everything I am sharing.