2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

Emily Schwartz

Suffocating

My dad had just gotten out of the hospital. His blood clot was gone. We were so happy he was okay now. He had jumped from his work truck and that caused a blood clot in his leg. But he was better now. My sister was at her friend’s shore house. My mom was crying a lot. I asked her why. She said she had watched a sad movie with my dad last night. I asked her what it was about. She didn’t want to talk about it. She got emotional when watching movies so I believed her. She was upset all day. I tried to ask her about it again. She kept giving me the same answer. My sister came home. My parents took us up to their room. We were petting our cat. Our mom started crying. Our dad told us he had lung cancer. I started to cry. I was so scared. The feeling was suffocating. My sister said that it was his fault. My dad had smoked for as long as I could remember, since before I was born. We had tried to get him to stop multiple times. He got mad. I had always hated that he smoked. The smell of it made me sick. Even to this day whenever I’m around someone who smells like smoke I feel uncomfortable and sick. We threw out his cigarettes. We had tried to reason with him, he never listened. Now he had to. It was really scary.

I had never dealt with the death of someone and for the first time, it might have to be my dad? That's terrifying, it was an awful feeling. Sure, if I was out somewhere or at school and distracted I wouldn't be thinking about it but when I was home I couldn’t escape it. I only really talked about it with my one friend, I didn’t feel comfortable talking about it with my other friends, I just wanted to be distracted from it. I bawled about it, it took over my life. I didn’t like being at home because even if I went to hug my dad I had to be careful to not touch the burns from the radiation on his chest. It got so bad that at some points he couldn't speak or eat much at all. That scared me a lot, the fact that my dad had to get hurt to help him didn’t make sense to me. I wanted my dad to be okay, not feel worse. The radiation also caused him to lose his voice and have difficulty eating. His throat was always sore and it made me feel sick to always see him in pain. It was a suffocating feeling, always feeling scared and worried at the same time.

Although this was all hard to deal with, we found support, my sister and I went to Camp Kesem and Gilda’s Club which helped a lot. I remembered the first time I went to both Gilda’s and Kesem. For both, I was nervous in the beginning, but after that, I felt very comfortable with everyone there. Finally, my dad went into remission, his cancer would never be completely gone, but it was managed. Some things he couldn't do because his breathing was bad now, but things were better. It wasn’t as suffocating to feel scared or to think about it.

After a few years, my dad read to me every night. He started messing up words. He was helping me with homework one night, and it was a pretty simple math problem. He couldn’t read it. My sister was going to her best friend’s house who she had known for years. When she told my dad, all he kept saying was, ‘Who?’ They scanned his head, and it had spread to his brain. This time things were worse, he couldn't think properly. That scared me even more than last time. The feeling suffocated me even more this time. He couldn’t drive, so my mom’s friend had to drive us around when my mom was at work. I didn't think things would ever go back to even being slightly normal again. Everything was so much worse this time around. Gradually, it did get better. He could read normally and it would be safe for him to drive again. Even though it doesn’t look like it’ll ever happen, I’m still scared that it might happen again. The main difference is, the feeling isn't suffocating anymore.