2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Grace Kwon

Her Hero, My Hero, Our Hero

In front of the chapel, a large casket with a body sat calmly in the midst of the gloomy room. My mom wept quietly next to me, while staring down at the lifeless body of her best friend, Janice. Next to me, my closest friend, Marley, and her dad silently sobbed at the corner of the chapel, not being able to take a look at the body. After seeing her sister and dad crying, Riley, Marley’s little sister, walked over to her dad and questioned, “Daddy, why are you crying?” with no sadness on her face. Her dad remained silent, trying to smile, while still letting out big droplets of tears, filled with pain. Knowing that something was wrong, but also not knowing anything about death, five-year-old Riley raised her tiny doll-like fingers and slowly wiped the tears off of her dad’s face, while having a giant smile drawn across her face.

It was something about Riley’s actions that made me immediately start balling. It was the thought of knowing that this poor, little kid had no idea about the meaning of death that made me lose it. She was not going to know the reason why her mom was not going to be by her side anymore. The thought of cancer winning over life infuriated me, and seeing Riley just playing around with her hands and feet, while her sister and dad were crying their eyes out shattered my heart into a million pieces. How would this little child have felt when she saw her mom laying down with her eyes closed in a casket instead of being next to her by her side? I could not stand the fact that Riley would one day come to a realization about the sad reality of cancer that took her mom away from her. I continued crying knowing that Riley and her family’s lives would never be the same ever again.

It was a couple of years ago when Janice’s cancer was reactivated. When she was diagnosed with cancer the first time, around five years ago, her cancer was able to be cured by removing the cancerous tumor located in her stomach. However, two years later, her cancer came back, this time, already having spread too much and not being easily curable. Janice was able to live for around three to four more months until she suddenly passed away. It was one Saturday afternoon, and I was in the living room watching a movie with my sisters, until I was interrupted by the sound of my mom sobbing. I saw her crying while coming downstairs from her room, and noticing that, I questioned with a face full of worries, “Mom, what happened?” Without being able to answer, my mom sat on the ground and continued sobbing. At that moment, I knew that something terrible must have happened, and even though I wanted to know what was wrong, I remained silent and wrapped my arms around her shoulders, trying my best to comfort her. After crying for ten more minutes, my mom all of a sudden got herself up, wiped her tears, and broke the sad news to me. Janice had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, again, but this time, it was not curable. I could not believe it. After hearing this heartbreaking news, I gave Marley a call and I remember just crying together. We did not say a single word and all I heard from my phone was the crying of Marley. I tried to comfort her, but I even failed to comfort myself. Seeing my best friend in so much pain hurt me even more.

Cancer had both a positive and negative effect on Janice’s family. Once her family found out that her cancer was reactivated and she would have to get treated for it again, her family clumped together to get through this hard time. Instead of showing signs of pain, they showed signs of strength. Knowing that their time together was limited, I observed that the family loved more and showed their appreciation to each other more. Every week, we had a friend’s meeting day where all of my close friends gathered together to spend a day with each other. Janice’s family attended this gathering every week, without missing a single one. However, after being diagnosed with cancer once again, I have noticed that Janice and her family were barely attending the meeting anymore. Every time I asked Marley why she could not come to the meet, she would always give me a response similar to, “Sorry, I am going out to dinner with my mom,” or “I have to take care of my sister because my parents are going to the hospital for mom’s checkup”. The time I spent with Marley and her family slowly but surely lessened, but the time Marley and her family spent together increased.

Janice’s cancer diagnosis also had both positive and negative impacts on my family and my life as well. Every day, when I came back from school, I found my mom, sitting in the kitchen all alone, with a tissue in one hand and her phone in the other with Janice. My mom sat on the phone, just crying. After listening to something Janice said, I saw my mom’s red face clearing up a little bit. After seeing her calming down, I took this opportunity to ask her what Janice had said to her that made her feel so much better. My mom told me what Janice had said to her. She had said, “It is okay, I have lived my dream life, and I have no regrets. Even if I am physically gone, I will be watching you from heaven”. Having heard Janice’s heroic words, I have not only thought of her as my mom’s hero, but mine as well. I could not understand how she could stay so strong, especially knowing that she did not have a lot of time left. The hardest thing for a sick person is to stay strong and positive when they see no hope for their future. However, Janice not only stayed strong for herself, but she also stayed strong for my mom, which is the most heroic thing I have ever seen.

After my mom told me what Janice had said to her, I smiled and acted all fine as if nothing was bothering me. However, while keeping my smile on my face, I quickly went upstairs into my room and cried. At this moment, I felt like a coward, a weak, stupid coward. As much as I wanted to seem strong, I was very much weak. All I could do was cry. The thought that a woman who was like a mother figure to me was going to be gone anytime soon was destroying both my physical and mental health. I could not even imagine how hard this situation would have been for Janice and her family.

A couple days after the death of Janice, I felt a strong urge to do something about her death, even if it was a very small act. Janice had passed away from stomach cancer, which sadly, cannot be treated easily. Normally, the cancerous tumor on the stomach would have to be cut off, but the cancer had spread so much that it was too late to cure. After doing some research, I realized that stomach transplants are extremely rare, which left me in shock. From that day on and forward, I became interested in the different types of cancer and how each one could be prevented. I wanted to be able to save people like Janice, so that no family would ever have to lose a loved one in their life. Soon, I became even more sure that being a surgeon was what I wanted to do as my future career.

Janice’s story was not a happy one, but I believe that it is still extremely inspiring. Janice fought her hardest, not for herself, but for her family and mine. She was the person who stayed strong, always with a smile on her face, even though she was the one going through unbearable pain, both physically and mentally. I am proud of Janice for being a hero and fighting for her family and mine, until her last breath.