2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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Perspective

On November 11, 2021, I took a spin class for the first time. The adrenaline was rushing through my veins with sweat dripping down my face and my legs feeling like jelly. Afterwards, I felt so accomplished and happier than I had been in a while. I had texted my mom seconds later that we needed to make this a weekly event together since we both enjoyed working out. Little did I know that the spin class would change my life forever.

I returned home that evening and was wiping the sweat off my neck when I realized the lumps. Multiple, distinct, ball-like lumps, gathered on the right side of my neck. When I showed my mom, who is in remission from thyroid cancer, she wasted no time getting me to see a doctor. The next afternoon I went to my pediatrician, who then ordered a chest x-ray. The following morning, I was at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in the ER. After multiple blood tests, CT scans, more X-rays, and hours of not eating, the doctors broke the news; Imaging had shown I had multiple swollen lymph nodes in my neck, with no signs of infection, and one giant mass surrounding my trachea almost the size of a baseball. Less than a week later, after a biopsy and PET scan, I was diagnosed with stage 2 with bulk Hodgkin&#39;s Lymphoma.

My treatments have been very long and tiring, most of them being spent admitted, laying in a hospital bed. However, after all those painstaking hours, I’m excited to say I am almost finished with my chemo treatments but will be starting radiation within the next few weeks. Luckily, there’s a positive prognosis and promising future ahead! Nonetheless, the side effects from my treatments were extremely unpleasant. This unfortunately caused me to miss school, one of my favorite things. Very reluctantly and based on my doctor&#39;s recommendation, I’ve had to drop most of my rigorous classes. Although I know it was for the best, it was still challenging to stop learning about topics I’m passionate about. Two of the classes I had to drop, Advanced Biology and Genetics and Embryology, I’ve been looking forward to since sophomore year. I’ve always been in love with learning, especially biology; it was extremely hard to let that.  However, I have been eagerly trying to attend in person as much as I can to keep my brain stimulated and keep my classroom connections alive.

Because I am not in school much, my participation in clubs and sports has been limited. I was on track to be a cabinet member for the Special Olympics, Unified Bocce, and National Honors Society, plus I was extremely excited to be a varsity player for the lacrosse team with all of my best friends. Although I can’t fully be a part of those activities, I am trying to be involved as much as I can. I went to the Polar Plunge Special Olympic event to cheer on my friends, and I attended most bocce meets. I am also continuing with my volunteer hours and grades to maintain my membership in NHS, and I am managing/assistant coaching the girls lacrosse team. Although I am still very disappointed that my senior year has not turned out as I had envisioned, I am happy to say I am trying to make the best of it.

As for my everyday personal life, it now consists of a lot of naps and walking. However, I have started physical therapy in order to regain my physical strength. I have also been picking up some new hobbies to help pass the time: I have been reading a ton of new books from all genres, learning how to bake and cook, teaching my puppy new tricks, and focusing more on self-care habits. I also hope to start volunteering at the Make-A-Wish foundation to brighten the lives of others going through the unsettling journey that I know all too well. Nonetheless, I have learned more about myself and have been through more these past few months than I ever have. My mental and physical strength was tested over and over again, whether it was shaving my head, trying to go up the stairs after a 9-hour chemo day, or being strapped onto a table for radiation. Those three things, along with so many others, are amongst the hardest things I have ever had to do. My anxiety and depression were, and still is, present every day. Nevertheless, each time I learned I only came out stronger, with a new perspective of what is truly important in life. Gratitude and the ability to make every moment count are among the most important lessons that I have learned.

This whole journey has also allowed me to think more about my future. Seeing other patients, mostly younger, go through similar treatments at a world-renowned hospital has made me gravitate more towards helping others in a medical sense.  Fertility, for example, was a top concern of mine throughout treatment; seeing and hearing that other oncology patients had the same concerns was eye opening. Luckily, I later found out that I didn’t have to worry about fertility with my treatment, but others aren’t that lucky. I have learned throughout this that I want to pursue a career as a fertility doctor, and I want to specialize in fertility with oncology patients. Fertility, genetics, and biology have always been of interest to me, and this journey has allowed me to figure out a profession that uses all three. It also allows me to help ease the mind and give options to those who are feeling the same uneasiness and nervousness I initially felt, like the doctors and nurses at CHOP did for me.

You never think something bad will happen to you, until it does. Getting a cancer diagnosis was extremely shocking and a life changing event. I was just in field hockey season, running up and down a field, and just submitted college applications. In the blink of an eye, your life could change forever. Take the time to appreciate what you have, the big and the small, because you never know when that could be taken away. Make every moment count; life is too short.