2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

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Cancer Did Not Become Me

Cancer isn’t something I associate myself with, unfortunately, it’s something that associated itself with me. Sometimes I say the words “I had cancer” aloud, but they still feel foreign like I’m speaking in French. I think the words feel more real to the people around me than they do to me, it all feels like a fever dream to me (likely because I was either unconscious or on too many meds to take in the situation).

It was pretty common for me to get stiff necks but it would usually go away with some Biofreeze or it would just go away on its own in a day or two. Except for this time, this time my neck not only was stiff but it began to look like I had a huge bruise on my neck which really weirded out my mom, it didn’t weird me out because very often I would find bruises on my body from me bumping into things and then forgetting about it.

About 2 weeks later I had my physical, and I’ll be honest I wasn’t completely telling the truth to the doctor because I was scared I would need surgery even though I had no idea what possibly could be going on with my neck. By the end of the checkup, my doctor said that it would be best to get an ultrasound on my neck. I also had to get a skin biopsy. Once we got into the doctor's office I started showing my mom a makeup product I thought was cool but she didn’t seem to be listening which annoyed me then, but I now know it was just because she was stressed about getting the results.

When the doctor came in she talked for a while and then she said that it was most likely Cancer. The word shot through me, I started crying and I looked over at my mom for assurance but my sturdy rock sat there in tears as well. Seeing my mom cry instead of telling me it would be ok scared me even more so I had to ask the question: “am I going to die?” my mom sobbed even harder. Then the words of relief came: “No, you will not die of this, we are going to get you through it” but if my mom hadn’t taken me to a doctor I would have died. We knew it was probably lymphoma but there was still a sliver of a chance that it wasn’t and my mom clung on to that like a dog to a bone but I knew it was cancer, I just knew.

The next day my dad drove us into the city for my surgery. We waited, eventually they called me in to get an IV but I wasn’t scared. I joked around with the nurses and they called me funny. After it was in we waited in that room for some time until a doctor came in, he was an older man with gray hair. He was so serious and boring I don’t think I listened to a word he said. After he left some more time passed and a child life specialist came in and talked to me about something that they were going to put in during the surgery called a port, she had a baby doll with a weird looking thing on its right side in between the nipple and collarbone and she showed me the thing they were going to implant. She told me that the tube thing would be attached to a vein that led to my heart, the thought REALLY freaked me out.

While I was waiting in the oncology waiting room there was a girl near me who looked not too much older and was bald. She was holding a camera and she was interviewing the nurses that seemed to know her very well. I talked to her for a while and I found out she had been fighting leukemia for 7 years. This was just the beginning. I spent most of the next My 3 months, at the hospital, I became very close to my nurses too. The treatment was hard, but I was very lucky, my body responded so well to the chemo that I have been in remission now for a full year. The whole experience is still a blur to me, I don't think about it much, but I think getting sick helped me mature, It has changed me deeply.