2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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How Cancer Changed My Life

In Mid-November 2020, my normal everyday life became a distant past that is slowly returning to me while fading away at the same time. 2020 was a hard year for well.. everyone. People lost their job, became ill and society fell apart in what seemed like two weeks. I remember my excitement about the “two-week quarantine”. My birthday was coming up and I was off school, it seemed perfectly set up for me. When two weeks turned into a month and a month turned into the whole year, I started to become accustomed to relaxation. It was around November 15th, with December slowly approaching. Many were excited for this year to end and for everything to slowly “turn normal” again, I was mainly excited about Thanksgiving meals and time with family. But during this time my mental state was terrible. I didn’t enjoy existing or life at all. After a few months of fighting with these thoughts, I told my dad about them. He was having physical problems himself so of all places to go, we went to a ready-care clinic. For some reason, my dad couldn’t receive a check-up and they didn’t offer mental health services which to me felt like a no-brainer, my dad signed me up for a physical instead. I don’t know why he did. Maybe he knew. The nurse who gave my physical was finishing up when my dad pointed out the lump on my neck. The nurse became concerned about the bump on my neck, at the time I thought “It’s not killing me, so I’m fine.” boy was I wrong. She sent us to Abington hospital. Before we pulled off to go to the hospital my dad told me “You’ll be fine. We’ll be there for about 30 minutes, go home, and get some waffles.” It was around 8:45 in the morning. When we checked in I told them about my mental health which was my biggest priority and my dad told them about the lump. They put me on suicide watch. I couldn’t use the normal bathroom or have anything. The room was desolate. All I could do was watch tv, sit, and sleep. When I wasn’t sleeping I was getting examined by so many people I can’t even remember their faces. After spending 12 hours at Jefferson Hospital I was sent to CHOP (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia) in an ambulance. It was late and the only reference for the time I had was the dark sky. After getting checked out some more, I was sent to an overnight room. I spent a week in the hospital being tested and getting surgery to see what was wrong. I like to say I stayed positive the whole time but really I was more oblivious. About a week after my discharge the hospital told us that I was diagnosed with Hoptchkins Lymphoma. People wonder how I felt the moment I was officially told I had cancer. The truth is, I felt numb and was nonchalant about the information. Information was thrown at me left and right and still is to this day. The hardest part was the hair loss. Not because I equated my femininity with long hair but because it was a constant reminder that I had cancer. That I was losing the hair that has been long and a constant since I was born against my will and couldn’t do anything about. One day I realized there is something I could do about it and decided to take my hair before “the cancer” took it. I cut my hair three times. Once before joining a mandatory camera on zoom class, the second was buzzing, and lastly was shaving it bald. When I was completely bald, there were times I felt like a girl when mistaken as a boy in public or being gawked at by people that were children and were adults. As my hair grew during the end of my chemotherapy I felt more at peace with myself and others.

May 15, 2021 I had to start chemotherapy again. I was heartbroken and felt like the hospital wasted my time, mental and physical health. I began blaming myself, thinking it was my fault it didn’t work that time. When I started again I had another surgery totaling three, soon to be four. After my cell extraction, I felt at peace with my cancer, like I have become one with my diagnosis.

I realized that I’m me and my cancer is too. Although I won’t reach my normal of catching the bus with friends or being able to walk up a simple staircase I realize that’s what made me stronger. I have always considered myself a “wuss” but the fact I wake up every day and I’m still the same Olivia that everyone would meet pre-cancer and on Fridays, I walk into and out of my appointments tired and defeated physically, mentally I feel accomplished and complete. Not ever, have I felt ashamed or embarrassed about it and loud and proudly I will say I have cancer. I’m currently in my first year of high school at PCCMC and college at CCP because I have goals that need accomplishing and I know no matter what it takes or what I have to go through I will get my associate’s, bachelor’s, and doctorate. I will be a biochemist. I will have a loving family. I will retire at sixty-five with a garden being my escape. I will survive.