 2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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My Story with Cancer

August 14th, 2018, this was a significant day but at the time I did know it. I was 13 years old, in 7th grade. My mind was focused on social life, boys, makeup; the aspects of life that when you grow up you realize do not have that much meaning. This was the day I found out my dad had cancer, we were supposed to go to Finland over the summer but had to cancel the trip. My mom sat my sister and I down at the dinner table but blew it off as if it was nothing, so I did the same. My mom did not want me to worry, I was 13 years old and my sister was 15, but I knew so little about how much the two people I loved most in the world were struggling. My mom told me within a few doctors appointments he would be okay, so I believed her. I saw him struggle, and all I could do was watch. I saw his spirit vanish, his lungs became weak, he had lost his energy. My dad was always my biggest inspiration, he had lived a life like no other but his journey was not over, until cancer had decided for him. My mom was always under pressure, she was juggling caring for my dad as well as raising two girls and making money. My dad had a job in Philadelphia, every morning he’d wake up early, get coffee and get on the train. Everyone at his office loved him and he loved social interaction until it was taken away from him. A couple months after battling cancer he had to leave his job, the one thing that gave him productivity, and I saw him lose himself… One year later, he was cured, or so they said. Hearing this news felt unimaginable to the point that I almost did not believe it. Although the cancer may have been gone it left a pretty big scar. My dad was never the same, it may have not gotten worse but it did not get better, he was still sick, still struggling. I was in 8th grade, but that weight on my chest never left. The older I grew the more I was able to understand, and the more concerned I became. He was better, but still stuck on the sofa watching television day through night. Once in a while he would get up and do dishes to help out, or he would do a small grocery list, but he was incapable of activity for a long period of time. Life was becoming more… normal, until one day in February 2021. The nightmare was starting all over again. It felt like when you are riding a carnival ride and all you can think about is getting off, but when it finally stops and you think it's over, you turn upside down. This time I had a different approach to the situation, I didn't have hope. I was 15 years old but I had to grow up a lot quicker than my peers, I was much more mature. I had to take care of myself as well as my house. My grades fell freshman and sophomore years because my mind was always on my family. It was happening all over again but this time it was worse. A nurse often stayed in our house to look over my dad and my mom took off work a lot. They never told me what was wrong, or what was going to happen but they told me he would be alright, I was smarter to know not to believe them this time. As time went on the words went down, my dad and I were starting to lose each other. It was the day of Easter and my whole family was sitting down at the dining table having our traditional Easter dinner. My 16th birthday was in a couple weeks so I asked my dad if I was getting a car and he told me no, I have to share it with my sister. At the time I was enraged. I did not understand what was happening to our relationship, I felt angered because he was never around. I put my dinner in the sink and left immediately to my neighbor's house and did not speak a word to him for the rest of the night… The next morning I checked the house but no one was home except for my sister. I called my mom immediately and she told me they are at the hospital for an appointment and not to worry, since I was so used to these hospital visits I didn't think anything of it. My day went on, I layed in bed all day until one of my friends called me up and asked me to go over. I ask my mom, she says yes, and as soon as I get into my neighbor's car I see his face with concern, as if he was unable to speak. He tells me he is taking me to the hospital to visit my dad under my mom's request. I go back to my house, get my sister, and he takes us. It was a rainy day and I was playing music in my ears while watching the rain stream down. I was holding back the tears as my mind got to the worst possible place. When I see my dad he is drugged up, I don't even know if he knows I was there. We tried to talk to him and I acted like I was okay but in reality I didn't know what was happening. We laughed a little and talked for the rest of the night until around 10pm. My sister took me home and neither of us spoke, but instead blasted music and drove around for a little while before we went home.I don't even know what I was thinking about but as soon as I got home I went to bed… 3am came around and my mom woke me up and asked me to go to my sisters room, so I did. The look on my mom's face was unforgettable, it was fearsome. I knew what was happening, but my brain was not fully awake until she opened her mouth and the words came out. The words I was petrified of hearing since August 14th, 2017. The words I imagined over and over in my head to the point I felt it was a dream. My sister starts shouting, tears are running down her face, and I just sit there. Everything froze, I could not move, my body felt numb. I looked at my mom and sister both falling and I watched, I couldn't make a noise… Today, one year later, I think about this almost everyday. I fight a battle against mental illness day through night as I was shortly diagnosed with depression after my father’s passing. I distanced myself from loved ones but this showed me who was willing to stay no matter how hard I pushed. I lost my biggest inspiration as well as my best friend in such a sudden. I let him leave with the last words of shouting at each other. I have regrets that take over my mind. My sister is off at college so it is just my mom and I in the house, it feels dark and cold without his light to shine on us. Without anyone to pick me up when I have fallen down, I have learned to be strong on my own. I have grown, I have struggled, I have had sleepless nights, but I am becoming stronger everyday. For months I had the mindset that nothing mattered because my dad wasn't there to see my accomplishments. I stopped caring about everything, life felt pointless. With time my mindset adjusted and I told myself I will do it all for my dad. I will travel the world like my dad did, I will become successful, I will achieve all my goals for my dad. I always get told it happened for a reason, but these words infuriate me. My dad did not leave us for a reason, he was the glue to our family and we needed him… Through my grieving journey I was able to regain my own self strength and came to realize how much I am truly capable of. I went through something most teenagers do not experience. My dad deserved to live his retirement in peace and joy more than anyone else. I wish he could see me graduate, get married, have kids, but everything happens for a reason doesn't it. My life has shifted in a way I didn’t know was possible, but with this I feel prepared for everything else that tries to come in my way. No matter how tall the mountain grows my legs will become stronger. We need darkness to see the light.