2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

Lyla Soleau

Cancer Survivor

Melissa is one of my mom’s best friends and college roommates. She is a preschool teacher, a wife, a mother of 4 boys, a Saint Joe’s Hawk, a former Jesuit volunteer, and friend. Melissa is also a breast cancer survivor. And now, 4 years after enduring cancer treatments and a double mastectomy, her cancer has returned only this time in her bones. It is called metastatic breast cancer, which means that the same type of cancer that grew in her breasts is now growing in other parts of her body. There is nothing she or doctors can do to stop it other than try and keep the cancer from finding other places in her body to grow. Right now, it is in her hip and her back. But who knows if and when it will find other places to grow.

Melissa is one of the strongest people I know. She is kind and caring and always takes care of others. When she first got the metastatic breast cancer diagnosis, she and her husband planned a dream trip to Ireland. But because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were unable to go on this trip of a lifetime. Instead, her days are now filled with doctor’s appointments, PET scans, check-ups, daily medications, and more, all to make sure that the cancer is not growing. This is hard on Melissa and her family because they have to watch their mom in pain and imagine what life might be like without her. Jack, Brady, Liam and Finn are all very protective of their mom and take care of her as much as they can. But they also are sad because they know there is nothing anyone can do to stop the cancer from growing.

Even though there is so much unknown, Melissa faces each day with the strength of a warrior. Not too long ago, she went on a trip to California with other breast cancer survivors to practice yoga and learn to surf. It was on this trip that Melissa realized that she needs to live and focus on filling her life each and every day. This past summer, her entire family spent a week at Dollywood with other cancer survivors. Melissa lives each day to its fullest as a preschool teacher, surrounding herself with young children whose laughs fill her heart each day.

The thing with cancer is, you don't know who is going to get it or who it is going to affect next, and it's heartbreaking. Cancer breaks people and families apart, and most of the time there's nothing you can do about it. You can't see it and it's devastating to know that. Sometimes it's there and you don't even know until it is too late. While there are treatments and sometimes cures, it can always come back and you never really know how long you have.

Melissa is a hero to me because, even though she is in pain, she lives her life to the fullest each day.