2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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A Fight of Strength

Every April 2nd, a silent woe fills my home. It’s unspoken - a soft, somber aura that floats in and out. No matter what time I wake up that day, my mother is in the kitchen sooner than any of us, having woken up far too long before. Her tear-stricken face greets us with a grim smile and my heart begins to ache.

April 2nd, 2004 is the day my grandmother passed away from cancer. She was only fifty-one, only three years older than my own mother is now. Even though my mother is the strongest woman I know, she still tears up every year on this day. She tells us the story of how my sister was born one month before she learned of the news, and how she had to pack up her newborn and fly twenty-five hours to India, hoping to support her family. She tells us stories of how she waited hours in hospitals, traveling to every doctor in Hyderabad, in hopes that just one of them could help save her. She tells us about finding out that she passed, crying on her sister’s shoulder.

Cancer is brutal. There’s no other way to put it. Cancer doesn’t care who you are, or where you live; it will come with no mercy and no regrets. Every year, I struggle to wrap my head around what it must have been like for my grandmother, having all of her family overseas, to cope with her entire life being thrown into upheaval. That frustration lingered in me for days, and I ended the day with that can only be described as dissatisfaction. I needed to do *something*.

I researched online for hours, trying to find a solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem. I didn’t know what I wanted to find; I just knew I needed to do that *something*. I enlisted my cousin in the fight, both of us having had seen the toll a loss in the family had taken on our mothers. After countless hours of perusing online, we found the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and set our hearts on donating to this charity.

LLS is a nonprofit that focuses on making treatments human. They spend significant funds on research, but they also focus on patient care, and advocacy. To us, there was nothing more perfect than an organization devoted to helping all the aspects of cancer. I heard stories of other families like my own, seeing the toll cancer had taken on their families, trying to make a change and do something better. I heard about all the bills LLS campaigned for, lobbying for more equitable healthcare and focusing on policies to improve cancer treatment. And we met Gia. Sweet, beautiful Gia. She is only ten years old and going through cancer treatment. We met her before our fundraising efforts and listened to her story. She went through more pain in her ten years of life than most people do in ten lifetimes. But she had strength in her eyes, and she told us that she loved us, and we knew we were doing the right thing.

Our fundraiser began by contacting everyone we knew. Immediately, we faced obstacles. Maybe it was coming back from the pandemic. Maybe it was inflation. But nobody was willing to donate. I was endlessly frustrated by my community, but I kept my grandmother and Gia in my mind, let out a long sigh, and got back to work. It was the hardest thing I’d ever done in my life, but when we met with children fighting for their lives, we knew we had to keep pushing.

We contacted every business in town, phoned every person we’d ever spoken to, and organized ever fundraiser possible. It was an effort of all fronts.

We ended up raising over $23,000. I still can’t process this number. When we saw the total at the end, I let out the longest sob I had in months. $23,000. It seemed unreal. Every dollar of that went towards helping families like mine and like Gia’s. When my mom found out about the final total, we sat down together and cried. There was so much I wish I could say to my grandmother, but I know that she would be proud of my efforts.

To me, cancer is not defined by loss. It’s defined by strength. The strength of my mother. The strength of Gia. The strength of all of the people who donated for a cause beyond themselves, something that would change lives. When we saw that grand total up on the stage, we knew it was for something bigger.