2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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Cancer Affects Us All

As I think back over my childhood I remember how excited I was to start kindergarten. I couldn't wait to go to in a new school, make new friends, and meet the teachers who would help to shape the next nine years of my life! My mom was a single parent and since she had to work I spent a lot of time with my Grandma and Great-Grandma. If my Mom was not available for school activities my Grandma was always there to participate and support me. Life was good and I knew just how lucky I was! Shortly before the Thanksgiving holiday I remember my Grandma talking to my teacher and then she hugged my Grandma. Apparently my Grandma had just told her she had been diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer and she wanted her to understand that if I seemed unfocused or there were any changes in my behavior it was probably due to the treatment she would be undergoing over the next few months and the changes in our family's everyday life.

At that time I didn't fully understand what it all meant but my Grandma tried to explain everything she would be going through so I was prepared for any changes that occurred. After her surgery I remember tubes and bandages but Grandma was still Grandma. Then she started chemotherapy. I had no idea what that was but that was when I noticed changes in her appearance. She was getting thin, she suddenly had no hair, she laid around on the couch a lot and stayed home more than usual. Grandma explained that the medicine she received through chemotherapy sometimes made her feel nauseous and very tired because it was very strong and would kill the cancer cells that were making her sick. I sure did miss the interaction we always had but she assured me that this was only temporary and in a few months she would be back to normal. She was right! She slowly started feeling better, her hair was growing back (thank goodness she didn't have to wear that little white knit hat any more), and she started to look like Grandma again. She soon went back to work but traveled back and forth to the hospital every day on her lunch break for radiation. Before long she was back at school with me for classroom activities and field trips. I was so glad to have my best buddy back and I know and understand now how incredibly sick she was and what a fighter she was through it all.

Grandma was cancer free for almost 12 years and during that time she was my biggest supporter and companion. My mom, sister and I moved into the house with my Grandma and Great-Grandma. In 2015, there was a bit of an adjustment period with four generations living together but life was good. In my sophomore year of school my Great-Grandma passed away so now it was just the four of us. Another adjustment but we were happy! My Grandma and I were both looking forward to my senior year in High School but unfortunately we reached another bump in the road. She had a minor fall in the spring of my junior year and thought she pulled a muscle in her back. Therapy didn't help and the pain was getting worse so she had an MRI done. Thank goodness she did because not only did she have a compression fracture of her lower vertebrae it also showed abnormal cells on her spine. Her breast cancer had metastasized to her bone.

It was a terrible summer! She had surgery again and radiation but the pain was unbearable. It broke my heart to see my Grandma in such pain. Life around our house changed drastically. Grandma could hardly walk and was sick from the medicine she was taking. There were days when my mom and I had to turn her in bed or help her change position. She spent everyday in her room in bed except to go for radiation or to see her oncologist. She needed us to support her if she walked and a wheelchair when she was out. We also had to help her get dressed when she would have to go to a doctor’s appointment. She was getting depressed because she couldn't help around the house, she was out of work which caused financial hardship for the whole family, and she was unable to go to any of my school activities. I was on the Cheer team for 4 years and my Grandma never missed a game or event until this season. She is also worried about my mom because she has to do everything around the house now in addition to working night shift as a nurse. She had to drive me to work, drive me to stores if I needed something, drive me to cheer practices and she drove me to school in the morning. She also had to do the shopping, cooking, cleaning and other daily errands. I really appreciated my mom for holding everything together around the house but it just didn’t feel the same and I missed doing stuff with my Grandma. My sister and I have also tried to pitch in and reassure my Grandma that we have things under control and she just needs to focus on getting stronger.

It has been tough on our whole family and we have all had to step up but we never lose sight of the fact that it is my Grandma whose life has been affected the most. She has to deal with this terrible disease and accept what she is no longer able to do. She is doing better now. Her body has adjusted to the medication she must take to prevent the spread of the cancer cells and she is walking a little better. She says she is always uncomfortable but can deal with it! She tries to help with small things around the house and she recently attended my school play *Grease,* and she accompanied me to my Cheer Banquet. It felt so good to have her with me again and I only hope she continues to feel better, get stronger and see me through my college years.