

2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

2nd Place Winner

Anne Pallozzi

The Battle is Over but the Scars Remain

They say time heals all wounds, but that's not necessarily true. Every wound leaves a scar. Time can help you regain your strength, it can help you find your footing again, but the scars never go away, a constant reminder of the trauma you've been through.

It's been nearly 13 years since my brother finished his battle with liver cancer. It's been 12 years since my mother had a large tumor removed from her abdominal wall, which led to us discovering a genetic cancer predisposition syndrome that she, my brother, and I all share. It's been 11 years since my mother had surgery to remove her entire large intestine in the hopes of preventing her from developing colon cancer. It's been 5 years since my brother finished his battle with brain cancer. It's been 3 years since my mom finished her battle with stage four metastatic small bowel cancer.

Each one of these traumas left its own scar. Every time we received a new diagnosis or other form of bad news, it shattered our world. Every time, we've had to pick up these broken pieces of the world we should've had and rebuild our lives. When all we wanted to do was fall apart and sink into the ground, we were forced to hold ourselves together. We just had to push through it, for there is never any other option.

Some people will hear our story and remark about how strong we are, as if it's a superhuman ability. It's not though. When you're thrown into a situation like ours, you only get two choices: preserve or curl up into a ball and die. Knowing that I had two parents who loved me dearly and a younger brother who depended on me, the second option was never really a choice. I'm sure it was the same for my parents and brother as well. Persevering was our only choice. During the hardest of these times, the only way to get through was day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute. Despite the number of years that have passed, I still remember telling myself during the hardest times that if I could get through the next 5 minutes, then I could get through the next 5 after that, and so on and so forth.

Though it will always hurt a little, knowing what could have been, it hasn't all been so gloomy. Cancer is an ugly and horrible monster, there's no doubt about that. But, the things that stem from it don't always have to be so awful.

Because I've had cancer in my life, I've gotten to meet so many wonderful people I otherwise would not have. Many of these people I now consider close friends who I can always trust when I want to talk to someone or just need to vent. As sad as it may seem, they are just simply much better at understanding how I'm feeling because they've gone through the same things themselves. These friends are also some of the most compassionate and caring people I know, something that I've found is quite common in people that have seen the horrors of cancer firsthand.

I am very lucky to have met and gotten to have these awesome people and amazing friends in my life. They truly do help when I need someone to talk to and they're also just awesome people to spend time with. For this, I cannot thank Gilda's Club enough. Many of these people I was originally introduced to either through Kids Support or at one of the many other events held at Gilda's.

I've also had the joy of being a summer camp counselor at Gilda's Club for the last four years. It has been such a rewarding experience to help create the magic I experienced at Gilda's summer camp when I was a child. I absolutely adore children and I've learned so much on how to work with and care for them. I've also learned some valuable leadership and organizational skills from my time as a summer camp counselor. Not only did I gain wonderful friendships through Gilda's club, I learned valuable life skills that I can use for the rest of my life.

Another amazing thing cancer has brought into my life is the realization of what I want to do with my future: work as a geneticist or epigeneticist. I've realized that genetic disorders are very common and very harmful to people, but they can also potentially be cured in the future. I hope to someday be a part of the team that finds a cure for my genetic disorder and others similar to that. I know I've certainly suffered plenty, and I want to ensure that no one else after my generation will ever have to go through all the trauma my family's genetic disorder has inflicted upon us. If cancer had never been in my life, I'm not sure I would still have come to the same decision on what I want to do with my life.

Lastly, cancer has caused me to change my perspective on life. Knowing that what you have can easily be removed or destroyed at any time has really shown me that every day is a gift, and I should appreciate it more. Even mundane things, like going to school every day or being able to go for a walk with my family or even just talk with my parents is a luxury many don't have. I understand this now because I've seen how easy it is to lose things like this. I'm grateful every day that I have all that I have and that I wake up every morning in a world that still contains both of my parents and my little brother.

Cancer still is to me and always will be an evil and disgusting thing. I have seen firsthand the trauma it inflicts and the permanent scars it leaves, both physically and mentally. I know the pain and suffering that comes with every diagnosis and every day of treatment. Still, I am grateful for what good it has brought into my life: all the amazing people and experiences, perspectives, and a career focus. I don't think there will ever be a day where I wouldn't be willing to trade this all away in exchange for a life untouched by cancer and genetic disorders, but I know that that will never happen, and I am forever grateful for all the good that has still managed to find its way into my life