



CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

Essay Contest

1st Place Winner

April Kelly

My Journey is not Mine Alone

My cancer story is our cancer story. In February 2012, I was seven years old, almost 8, when my mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 salivary gland cancer. While she had spent two days in the hospital to have her tumor removed, I had a sleepover at my cousin's. Only after she returned from the hospital with her hair still matted with blood did I understand the seriousness of her hospitalization.

What did this mean? This thing was happening to my mom, my only caregiver. It was just the two of us. Who would take care of me if something happened to her? Where would I go? I feared I'd have to live on my own. I had many questions and no one to talk to about them. Throughout the remainder of the school year, my mother tried a dozen or so times to arrange meetings for me with the school counselor, but it wasn't until the last week of school that the counselor reached out to me. She kept forgetting, she said and didn't remember until late June.

Mom underwent two more surgeries and six weeks of radiation during that time. I watched as she became thinner and thinner, and it became harder and harder for her to care for me. Things were changing, and I didn't know how to process it all. I had my friends, but they could not help me. I was scared, scared for my mom, and scared for myself.

Sometime in midsummer, mom found CSCGP. At that time, the most helpful thing was a book she brought home. It provided activities we could do together to help me process what was

happening. So, every Saturday or Sunday morning, I would climb into her bed, and together we'd go through an activity to help me find the words to convey my feelings. After all, cancer had changed everything.

Mom's energy plummeted, and our extracurricular activities stopped. Life was no longer the same. I had no idea when or if it would return to how it was before. Then I began attending Kids Support. I felt like I had been thrown a life raft.

Kids Support was something geared towards me, a kid. We discussed what was happening in terms I could understand and in ways that were not scary. It helped that whatever was discussed was done in a play setting, so I was comfortable, even though I didn't immediately open up. It also meant that mom and I could go out again. It gave us something to do and someplace to go again.

Naturally, the crafts and activities were the best part, but the other kids who showed up were like icing on the cake. I was not alone in this. Other kids' moms, dads, or grandparents/guardians were battling cancer, which had disrupted their lives, much like mine. Our shared trauma comforted me because no one in my home or school life experienced that with which I was dealing.

I attended Kids Support at Ridgeland until I aged out of it, around 12 or 13. The program was most influential because it helped me process my mom's cancer so that it did not loom so large and scary. And while I recognize the impact of Kids Support on me, I also acknowledge the impact of several CSCGP programs on my family.

Early on, we attended family-driven activities, and I saw other families living with cancer, thriving even. Some activities allowed me to bring my younger cousin, India, who could share in my cancer experience and understand my pain, if only a little. CSCGP also put us in touch with external programs like Camp Kesem. Seeing these families and interacting with kids like me gave me hope.

In 2014 when I read my book, *The Day I Was the Only Kid in School*, an allegory of my feelings at the time, at the CSCGP Ladies' Tea, I saw a room full of women living and enjoying life. It gave me confidence, and it also gave me hope. Most importantly, these programs gave my mom and me things we could do together again, and I had hope for myself and our future.

It is strange to say, "I am fortunate my mom's cancer is ..." but it's true. My mom's cancer is slow-growing. It's eleven years later, still growing, having expanded much more, but she's still

alive, and I am grateful for that. I realize others were not so fortunate. Cancer Support has shown me that cancer cannot defeat my family and me, but it's also shown me that when it does claim your loved one, they will be there for you too. They will help you through that as well. I'm grateful my mom is still here, but I'm also thankful CSCGP is still here if and when I need them again.

I appreciate your consideration.