



CANCER SUPPORT  
COMMUNITY  
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

## 2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

### Essay Contest

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner

## Cyrus Patel

### And Then There Were None

“Cancer is the constellation we see in the night sky, right?”. This is the first thing my youngest brother Seth, who was four at the time, said when my parents whipped around the parking lot at the end of our Great Wolf Lodge trip. The sound of splashing in the water park, and the yelling and screaming with joy in the hotel room, were replaced by the deafening silence that erupted in the car as my parents glared solemnly back at us. My mom and dad just shared with us that my mother was sick and that she had cancer.

As the oldest of my siblings, I thought I was supposed to know what it meant that my mom is sick. But, I just sat there with my brothers staring blankly beyond the gaze of our parents. My mom had stage 3 breast cancer, but it was described to us as a sickness that she would have to go to the hospital for until she got better. I cannot speak on my brother's behalf, but I simply nodded and took every word they said for the truth.

Strand by strand, pound by pound, the chemo started leeching at her vitality. My brothers and I would occasionally be taken to see her, but she was tangled in a maze of cords as a skeleton of her former self. I would be unfazed as I had no concept or notion of death since I was 8 years old and at the start of my life.

The days passed and I went to school as I normally did. I had a relatively normal life since my grandfather helped my dad bridge the rift caused by my mother's absence. That would change quickly as my dad would suffer a near-fatal motorcycle accident the same year. My grandfather took over the burden of watching us, and for three little boys, we would walk in to see dad on one side covered in bandages on a hospital bed, and mom on the other side

clinging to life. What would have terrified anyone had me unfazed as a child of eight years because it was my normal.

Time passed and then there were none. Both of my parents were in the hospital and for my grandfather to fill the gap completely was impossible. There was only one thing that gave me a glimmer of hope - Gilda's Noogie Land! Gilda's club or now CSCGP made it seem like nothing was off in my life at all. In the summers, my brothers and I would do arts and crafts, tie-dye, and have a week of nothing but adventure and life-long friends. Even throughout the year, it never felt like anything was missing. Back-to-school events, breakfast with santa, easter egg events, christmas in july, and a wide variety of others snuck into our calendar and gave me as normal of a childhood as possible filled with joy and community. Aside from that, our grandfather had us going to Kumon, karate, and sports, giving us no time to think about the fact that both of our parents could be gone at any moment.

Fast forward to today where both of my parents are alive and well, and it has been 10 years since my mom's battle with cancer. Week after week, year after year, I yearn for the old days of the experiences of camp provided through CSCGP. It became part of our family tradition. I looked forward to and attended every year, starting first as a camper then as a counselor. I found other support programs and events to expand my cancer community horizons through CSCGP such as Camp Kesem, and since then, I have never looked back.

Despite the fact that cancer is a terrible thing, the lessons that I learned from it and from CSCGP are unlike any other. The journey was long, but cancer teaches you to be optimistic, independent, and strong. It also teaches you to cherish those around you and live life to the fullest since cancer is random – it can affect anyone at any time. "And then there were none," turned back into everything I could ever ask for, and going forward I will be giving that experience forward to those with similar experiences such as myself. Today, I am a freshman in college at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. I am looking forward to helping out Noogie Land this summer and have officially joined Kesem at my university as well. If it were not for the Cancer Support Community of Greater Philadelphia and the programs run by Christina Wise, I would have had a completely different experience and not the sense of normality that I have grown to love and accept throughout the years. Every cancer journey or story can end with sorrow and tears. In my case there were many opportunities for me to be the victim of this cancer journey having both parents being affected by tragedy. However, I see myself as the beacon of hope; I am one such story that has a happy ending because of family support, CSCGP's events and camps, and Kesem.