2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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Agape

One of my greatest fears was experiencing the loss of a loved one from cancer. Unfortunately, little did I know that a couple of months ago my fear turned into reality. This past year I noticed some unusual behavior from my parents, and more specifically my mother. My mother looked extra attractive with nice hair and would wear stylish clothes that she never would have worn before. I thought she was acting strangely, but she never complained or gave me any reason to worry that she was suffering. The truth is, I've always imagined myself and my loved ones to be part of a perfect utopia. I was mistaken – a month ago, I was officially informed of my mother's terminal illness and subsequent death. This experience not only gave me an insight regarding life itself, but also taught me the power of a mother’s nurturing spirit and unconditional love. In hindsight, I see how the hospital's emptiness mirrored mine, despite the positive messages about "staying strong" plastered all over the walls. It was a place where people went daily to offer encouragement to those whose area of expertise is helping people feel better. While some individuals improved, others, including my mother, remained neither hopeful nor recovered. I wished for a miracle, believing that some divine power in this world was watching over her and determining her fate. I feared a predetermined fate but found a cruel semblance of peace in the knowledge that it is beyond our control.

I spent twenty-five days walking down the same white walls with my head held high and giving strangers a smile that turned up only at the ends and never reached my eyes. Initially, the environment was so overwhelming that I felt like I did not belong there. I would hear the wailing of strangers as they realize they must continue living without their loved ones. I had become desensitized to being constantly surrounded by people who appeared as lost and broken as I did. The first day my mom was admitted to the hospital I took off from school to spend time with her. I didn’t know any details other than she wasn’t feeling well for the past month and the doctors told her to come here. I had been talking about unrelated topics for about twenty minutes to fill the silence and avoid asking the questions I wanted to have answers for. A doctor and her interns all came in to evaluate my mother. As one of the interns was explaining why my mother had slurred speech, dizziness, and weak motor functions, she used the word “cancer” in her statement. In that second, that one word I had no comprehension of other than it being not good to have, held me paralyzed to my uncomfortable chair as I stared at the window trying to let my brain process the meaning of a single word, I did not comprehend beyond the fact that it was undesirable to possess. It wasn't until another group of medical professionals came in and repeated the word "cancer" to describe the large tumor that had progressed into my mother's brain in such a critical location, that they could do almost nothing to help, that my heart began to break slightly. Little did I know that that first day was the most responsive out of the whole month we were there. The next day, when I finished school, I discovered that my mother had been relocated to a different room at the hospital. While I was in the hospital, I stood aimlessly by the doorway needing time to process everything that I was experiencing, before witnessing my mother in such a poor state. After preparing myself mentally for what would happen from today and then on, I walked into the room and saw my grandmother, the most talkative and cheerful person I know. Witnessing her immense sorrow and pain looking hopelessly at her daughter made me realize how much of a bad state my mother was in. My mother was in excruciating pain, but she managed to communicate with my grandmother and give her some comfort by squeezing her hands and staring into her eyes.

Every subsequent day brought us closer to the inevitability of what was to come. As the days passed, I found myself pushing myself to become stronger to support not only myself but also my mother in her condition. At one point my mother was asleep for a week and was transferred to another room. There was one day when she was completely unresponsive, and we all thought that was the day she would pass. She was surrounded by her loved ones as we filled the room with memories of our time with her. We all let our hearts break in front of each other, relinquishing a little more of who we were with each memory we shared of her pure love, instead of fighting the pressure in our chests or trying to embrace the heartbreak she was causing us. The next day however was when she gave us hope. For two days she was a semblance of herself again as she greeted nurses and used polite phrases like “please” and “thank you”. She remembered our names and insisted on making sure her brother got the gifts he wanted her to ship out and wanted to make sure her best friend got to see updated pictures of her, so she knew she was thinking of her. My mother realized that her best friend, my aunt, had traveled from Greece to be by her side until the end and attempted to communicate with her in various ways. I found it empowering and astonishing that my mother was a loving soul despite her daily battles with cancer; she was a fighter.

One thing that I found acute respect for was my mother’s selflessness when she kept her diagnosis a secret from the people she loved for an entire year. She hid it out of fear that they would endure even a fraction of the pain she was experiencing. The most altruistic female figure in my life wanted to prevent her mother from having a heart attack, also to ensure her son's professional success, and for her sixteen-year-old daughter to be focused on her schoolwork and have fun with her friends. My father, her high school sweetheart, her best friend's brother, and her companion for thirty-five years was the only one that knew about her diagnosis. He took her to multiple appointments while researching physicians and medications. Her diagnosis altered the dynamics of our household, but one thing that never changed was her dedication to the people she loved, which is why I never voiced my concerns to her. My mother never went to the doctor for checkups because she "felt fine" and preferred to spend her time watching her children play sports, folding their clothes, or dancing with the man she loves in the kitchen. Things within our four walls held unspoken truths I was too fearful to shine a light on. No one knows the pain she was going through, and she never complained to anyone about the way she was feeling. Forty weeks and countless hours were spent prioritizing others before herself and cancer didn’t change that about her.

Automatically, when we hear the word “cancer” we associate this with being frail and weak. However, when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer, one's perspective on the disease changes. The person you know is not solely defined by the disease that afflicts their body. My mother taught me the value and essence of love, and that expressing affection doesn’t involve saying a single word, but through heartfelt actions. My mom loved everyone in her life and showed it through these memorable small acts of kindness and compassion. When my mother was around, we didn't have to worry about anything. Life will be difficult without her, but we will treasure everything she taught us in her lifetime. When my mother was ill, she left us notes hidden throughout the house. We now follow her written instructions on how to do the laundry and how to prepare and cook our favorite recipes. To keep her spirit and memory alive, we also say words and phrases that she used to say all the time. The absence of my mother has made me prioritize the most important things in my life like spending time with family instead of watching a Netflix show by myself. My experience with cancer has taught me that the shared experience of grief can bring individuals closer together, as they find solace in remembering the one person they've lost. In conclusion, “agape” in Greek means love and my mother is the pure definition of love. My mother’s essence will always be eternal and her love for me will always flourish as the years pass by.