2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

1st Place Winner

Eirinn Love

Volume Ninety-Eight

On average, a person says about 860,300,000 words in their lifetime. Out of those many words, I thought not saying goodbye wouldn’t make a difference. That I could always do it next time or when I get home. But I never got the chance.

I never thought that when my parents would break the news and tell my sisters and I that my grandfather, my biggest role model, had pancreatic cancer, I would be stoic. My parents thought my reaction was in shock or I was too naive to understand the severity of it all, but I had found out long before my sisters and even my mom. I was playing video games in my family room when I overheard my father talking to who I assume was my aunt about how he is already long past Stage IV and he’s practically done for. I had put the pieces together of who the “he” was pretty quickly for a ten year old. After all, I had not seen my grandfather in over two months when he usually came over once every week. I remember sitting on my couch with the remote in my limp hand and just staring. I don't think I even cried. It’s funny what shock does to someone who thought they were invulnerable.

By the end of Stage IV, my grandfather had decided that instead of spending his remaining time in the hospital, he should be with family and go out on his terms. I saw firsthand the strong hurricane of a man who would drive me to gymnastics, crumble before me. First he was a little slower with his responses and his witty remarks, but then it was the physical aspects. I watched a man I dreamed to be like become thinner, smell of antiseptic instead of Hubba Bubba bubble gum, and lose track of people’s names. I can not lie, the whole experience scared me. He was bones and a mess of wrinkly skin, but there was so much overflowing love that fear paled in comparison. I remember thinking that if I had to stay up with him and hold his hand through night terrors I would, because I know he would do that for me. That if I had to rewind the movie one second at a time just to put it back to normal I would. But no matter how many times I clicked that plastic button, I could not go back to how it was, and I knew that’s all he wanted to do.

On April 12th, 2018 my grandfather passed away. He died thirty minutes before I would have gotten home from school. I remember getting off at the bus stop and seeing the line of cars, all belonging to different family members. I think that was when I knew, deep down in some primal way, that he was gone. It wasn’t the hushed tones when my sister and I walked through the door. It wasn’t my aunt and grandmother rushing us both back out front and making sure we stayed there. It was the silence. There was no beeping of his heart monitor, no history channel on volume ninety-eight like he demanded it to be, and there was no slight wheezing. I remember looking at my mother’s blooming lilies as I was trying to convince myself that I was wrong. That he was suddenly all better and perfect and whole, and he was waiting in his pickup truck to take me to gymnastics with a little baggie of bubble gum sitting on the passenger seat. But I was wrong. I remember falling when I got confirmation. I am pretty sure I was screaming too, an inhuman wail that seemed impossible to be coming from a ten year old.

You never truly get over that. The act of having to grieve someone still alive, and then still go through the pain of their passing. Many assume grief strikes hardest on holidays or birthdays, but for me? It’s whenever I’m confused about a math problem and go to say “Pop-Pop will help me with it.” It’s whenever I see Hubba Bubba bubble gum, or whenever I stick a landing in gymnastics and turn to see his nod of approval. For me, it is when the mundane becomes abstract. Because to me, cancer is the monster that took away my hero and I’m reminded of it every day.