2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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Fragments of a Life

We never know when a person truly leaves our world, but we still condition ourselves to feel guilt over whatever incidents or missed opportunities of the past. For me, I still feel guilty for my grandfather about all of the times I never got to talk to him. He was a truly incredible man who didn’t get to live long enough. Although we think we are entitled to time, we really don’t own any of it, and we can’t always predict when it will be our time to leave. Cancer can take many people away with no mercy, but even those who defeat cancer still have issues stemming from it. I want everyone still grieving to remember the good in their loved one's lives, because you can’t go back and change anything anymore. Even though my grandfather is no longer here to read this essay, I would like to hope he is proud of my telling of his story.

When my grandfather was 2, he immigrated from Wales with his family. They didn’t have much money and had to send my grandfather to his aunt's farm to work, because they couldn’t afford to raise 2 sons. Several years later when my grandpa was 18, he and his brother decided to join the military. After my grandfather had enrolled, he found out his brother bailed on him, and realized he was going into this alone. He was awarded a Purple Heart, but we never knew what happened because he never wanted to talk about it. Later, he met my grandma, and they had my mom. They grew up on D street in Philadelphia until my mom was 5. The conditions in the area were worsening, and my grandfather stayed behind to sell the house. Then, they all moved to New Jersey where a lot of other family were. My grandfather was a hardworking man who would work on projects for sometimes 7 days a week. He used to say that going to build the Limerick Towers was easy money, because you could go there for 3 days and return with a lot of money. Eventually when my mom was 10, her parents wanted a son but gave birth to two twin daughters. However, my grandfather was a smoker, so that’s where cancer comes into play.

When I was in first grade, my grandpa had gotten stage 4 colon cancer. He was always tough though, so it wasn’t a shock that he sprung back from it. He never liked to spend money, but to celebrate beating cancer, he took our family to Disney. I never knew that he took us on a trip for that reason, and I wish I could have said thank you to him. Even though he beat cancer, he still had some health problems. From what I remember, his health continued to steadily decline, and he had to get an oxygen tank. He always said that he didn't think he’d make it to 60 years old, and he was shocked when he did. I remember all of the different hospitals and rehabs I visited him at. I wish I would have taken it more seriously instead of being fascinated by the birds at one rehab. Or in the hospital room I would go on my phone. He used to always tell me and my brother that “our thumbs were gonna fall off” from the amount of time we spent on our phones. Eventually, his health caught up to him.

In 2018, his oxygen tube disconnected while he was driving, and he crashed into a telephone pole. He made it out alive and someone had called an ambulance. He made it through the hospital and was about to go into rehab. My grandpa lived in Cape May and used to go to the Moose Lodge there. He didn't have a car anymore, so he called his ex-wife, my grandma, to drive him there. They were still friends, but they just didn’t work as a couple anymore. When my grandpa came home after the bar, he sat on the porch like he always did. He died there shortly after.

I remember seeing my mother break down. There is nothing sadder than to see your parent sob about the loss of a loved one. I remember that as a very hard time, because my mom had just gotten divorced, and we were struggling as a family. I always carried guilt with me because I never really talked to my grandpa. I think my mom always felt guilty, because she wasn’t there when he died. She would always tell me that that’s the way he wanted to die. I remember when my grandpa used to stay over at our house. He also wasn’t very tech savvy, so every morning he would use text to speech about 10 times to tell his daughters good morning. When he passed, my mom used to read his old text messages, because she knew she would never get another good morning from him. When my mom and her sisters went to the funeral home to collect his belongings, one of the items was his wallet. The sisters jokingly gave the wallet to my aunt Ashley saying that she needed it. They went out to dinner after that and decided to split the bill. The amount that everyone had to pay was the exact amount of money in my grandpa’s wallet. I mean down to every last penny. I guess things work in mysterious ways.

I have so many stories and memories from him that I could go on and on about. Like when my grandma sat in his old chair at the Moose Lodge and the next day, the place caught on fire, and everything was burned but his chair. I don’t believe in every superstitious thing, but with the series of events that happened after his death, I’d like to think that there is some sort of afterlife. I wish I could have gotten to talk to him more, but I don't think anyone predicted he would die at the age of 66.

Part of accepting his death comes with the realization of time and reflection. Anyone is able to be taken away at any minute. Time just runs endlessly, and we have no choice but to abide by it. And for the reflection of myself, I realized that I shouldn’t be so stubborn to talk to people. That man gave his everything to everyone, and I feel like I never got to thank him or give anything in return. Although this essay is not much, this is my gift to him since I can’t go back and change the past. I can only act now, and hope that there is some sort of afterlife where he can see this. My mom still misses him every day, and I'll never forget the pain it brought when I saw her weep. I know everyone thinks that he should have lived longer, but I think he was happy enough with what he had done.

My message to everyone out there is to talk to people. Spend time with your loved ones, so you have no regrets when they are gone. If you are mad at someone right now, forget your pride and forgive them. Life is too short to not live it. And now with rising cancer rates, you have no idea when your battle or someone else’s battle could begin. And that may be the last time you get to see them. Realize the past is gone, and you can only work on the present.