



CANCER SUPPORT  
**COMMUNITY**ight Left in Me  
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

Essay Contest

3rd Place Winner

Emily Clark

‘Cause I’ve Still Got A lot of Fight Left in Me

August of 2012 was an extremely difficult time of transition for me. I started middle school, switched churches, and my mom was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. I hid it really well, but I was struggling immensely. I remember so many adults in my life commenting on my “strength” and my “resilience”, but I didn’t want to be strong. I wanted to be soft, to be naïve, to be a little kid. I had no fight left in me, but I couldn’t be the weak one in my family, no. I was the older sister. And I certainly wasn’t the one with cancer. My orchestra director in middle school saw directly through my crap, recognizing I was really struggling through my mom’s treatments. She didn’t know the bubbly, pre-“my mom has cancer”-kid, but she knew something was off. She sacrificed hours of her lunches and after school time throughout the course of my 6 years under her direction, and she watched me toss my cap in tears. Her investment in me solidified my choice to pursue music education...I wanted to support students like she supported me. It wasn’t until my mom talked about how much the violinist and the

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harpist in the infusion room helped calm her that I began to think about music therapy instead, but I really shifted away from music education when a music therapist brought her guitar to camp at Gilda’s Club one summer. I remember watching the faces of the campers, some of whom were very reserved, light up. She passed out lyric sheets for Rachel Platten’s “Fight Song”, and she played her guitar while all the staff and campers sang along. After some reflection, I realized that counseling kiddos who don’t have the support necessary was the career trajectory I *needed* to follow. Maybe I’d be able to reach more kids in need of support this way!

The last time I recall visiting camp was in the summer of 2019, the week I flew out to The University of Sydney, Australia to study and do research in their psychology and music departments. I had taken the day off from work so I could pick up my little brother from camp and say hi to Christina Wise. Between living abroad, COVID-19 lockdowns, summer internships in Pittsburgh, graduating college with a B.A. in Psychology and Minor in Music Performance, and permanently moving to Pittsburgh, I haven’t had the opportunity to come back to camp. I miss the community I had at Gilda’s Club; however, I’m grateful for the support I received throughout my secondary education and my mom’s diagnoses, and I attribute many of my collegiate opportunities to (what likely totaled dozens of) Christina’s thoughtful letters of recommendation. To be honest, I can’t tell you what camp looks like now—I imagine quite a bit different, and a lot of the littles I imagine to be quite a bit taller than me...maybe they’ve even been counseling at camp in the summers! I hope the doors are still red, and the summers are still the best kind of chaotic. I hope the community still shows out to support the Gilda’s Club community. I hope the counselors still get there early one morning over the summer to fill up a hundred water balloons for the kiddos. I do know one thing for sure...I can tell you with confidence that, more than any other community I’ve been involved in, my experience at Gilda’s

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Club shaped my career trajectory into what I’m currently working toward: Pediatric Psychosocial Oncologist.

In order to pursue this goal of pediatric psychosocial oncology, I am working on my doctorate in counseling psychology at Chatham University (Psy.D.). As of yet, there is not much respect given to the importance of integrated care (psychologists and medical practitioners working together for the benefit of the patient) in the various health fields, so I appreciated Chatham’s focus and grant opportunities. The Psy.D. program is deeply involved in the HAPPY Project (Healthcare Alliance Promoting Pittsburgh Youth Project), which is an available grant for students working in youth-based integrated care at a local practicum site. I plan on applying for this grant further on in my spot in the program, when I apply to a practicum rotation at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center. I have also begun laying the groundwork for my dissertation with Dr. Luke C. Henry, PhD (leading neuropsychologist in the Department of Neurological Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh), with the focus on pediatric tumors, and the pre- and post-operative neuropsychological testing. As much as my prior training has been in the “psychosocial” aspect of psychology, and not the “neuroscience/biopsychology” side, I am incredibly excited to begin working with Dr. Henry! Now that I’m a few years out of my mom’s treatments, I can appreciate the experiences I had that will help me be a more compassionate and empathetic helping professional. Through my practicum sites, dissertation, and electives, I plan on specializing in pediatric neuroscience and family systems theory, which I hope will help secure a permanent position at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center as a Pediatric Psychosocial Oncologist.

I’m grateful that the Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant has welcomed entries from all students pursuing higher education this year, and I’m sure it will be beneficial for several

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families. Cancer doesn’t just impact the family system in a psychosocial way, but often financially. I am working full-time on top of my full-time doctoral program (just trying to survive!), and I’m no stranger to the fiscal responsibilities associated with completing nine years of higher education. You’ll likely be hearing from my little brother as well, who was also impacted by my family’s financial situation, and is in the middle of his freshman year of college. Pride doesn’t come close to describing how I feel watching his perseverance through several years of turbulence in my family, and strength in his transition to college from all the way across the state. He is so deserving of this award as well! This is just a glimpse into the past ten years of my family’s story, and I hope you enjoy his perspective too. It’s been a fight for both of us, and I’ve got several more years of higher education to go before I receive my doctorate, but I know “I’ve still got a lot of fight left in me” (Rachel Platten, 2015, “Fight Song”).