2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Honorable Mention 3

Emily Schwartz

Love and Support

I’ve had to deal with my dad’s lung cancer for years. It started out bad, the chances of him surviving were very slim. I never really understood the phrase, ‘ignorance is bliss’ until after I found out my dad was diagnosed. I can clearly remember my mom sobbing randomly. My dad had just gotten over a blood clot, things seemed great. She told me she had just watched a really sad movie. Being so young and knowing my mom cried over movies a lot, I believed her. The next day she was crying too. I asked again, and she said the same thing. I still believed it. I felt fine the whole day, sure it was odd that my mom was acting like this, but she would tell me if something was wrong, right? She didn’t.

She waited until my sister was home from a weekend trip with her friends so both of us could know at the same time. I can picture so clearly being in my parent’s room. My sister and I sat on the bed and I pet our cat who was napping. I’m not exactly sure if my mom was there or not, she probably was because this was an important thing to be telling us. I can’t remember the exact wording my dad used to tell us or how anyone else reacted, but I remember my dad’s worried tone of voice and how I felt pure desperation. I sobbed into my cat’s fur. I know my parents tried to comfort my sister and me, but that feeling didn’t go away for a long time. I remember times when he couldn’t even talk because of his treatments. This made the panic really set in, my dad couldn’t even tell us how he was feeling. After a struggle for years, my dad was finally in remission. He wouldn’t ever be the same, he had bad vertigo and was constantly short of breath, but it was getting better.

Things started to feel normal again, no more harsh treatments, no more burns on his chest from radiation, just pills every day. Compared to what he had been going through before, the pills were nothing. Later on, he started acting strange. He was unable to read at times, even simple things, or couldn’t understand who one of my sister’s close friends was. He got checked out, and we found out the cancer had spread to his brain. Whole thing again, except, it was scarier this time. Instead of just taking away his voice, this took away his ability to think. At this point, I was so scared to tell my friends. I told some very close ones, sure, but they wouldn't fully understand it. They wouldn't know how it felt to be dealing with this. This time around, I had outside support.

Gilda’s Club and Camp Kesem are the two best things I've ever been able to be a part of. Sure, friends are nice, but the ones you get to laugh with and cry with over similar experiences mean so much more. At Camp Kesem, in the span of three or four days, you meet these new people and learn not only so much about them as people, but about how cancer has affected their lives. I can still feel how scared I was before that first week of camp. I can also feel the elation that came after I got to feel more comfortable there. Empowerment has had such an impact on me as a person. People who I wouldn’t have taken a second glance at if I had passed by them a few days earlier were now sobbing with me and hugging me. I’ll never forget the first time I went there and how happy it made me feel, even at the sad parts we all felt so connected to each other.

Gilda’s Club serves as a somewhat similar place, yet a very different environment at the same time. Sometimes, Gilda’s servers as a distraction from everything happening. Other times, it’s there to help with working through all of those feelings of hopelessness. I know how helpful it was for me to just get my mind off of things and bake some pies with Susanne, or to help work through those hard feelings in the group with Karen. Being able to make friends at Gilda’s and make things somewhat better for a little while has meant so much to me. Now I’m able to give that happy experience to other kids, helping out at events and camp. Seeing a kid’s face light up as they chase me with a water balloon makes me feel so happy that I’m the reason that kid is so full of joy at that moment. Knowing exactly how I felt running around at camp and having fun, letting others feel that same way is so incredibly special, especially when things at home aren't very fun.

I’ll forever be grateful to everyone who has helped me and my family through our journey with cancer. I know things would have been a thousand times harder without the love and support we had from friends, family, and even strangers who were a part of Gilda’s and Kesem. Being able to help some people through that journey after being through it myself makes me realize how important it is to have love and support, and honestly just a break during those tough times.