2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Honorable Mention 2

Julia Sipes

Signs from an Angel

The saying ‘all wounds heal’ is a myth. There will always be a hole in my heart that will never be filled from the loss of a loved one. Maybe this hole can only be filled when we reunite in Heaven and we can finally hug each other after a long time apart. But as of right now, there is no band-aid large enough to cover up my grieving heart.

Someone very special to me died on August 16, 2020. A grandmother, a loved one, a friend. A really, really good friend. She was a best friend to anyone and everyone she ever met. She made friends at the grocery store or when she was at CVS grabbing a card to send her love. Helene never missed an opportunity to send a card, whether it was Christmas, someone’s birthday, or just a random Tuesday. Her cards were signed in a beautiful cursive that mimicked the waves of the ocean. She sent them just because she wanted to make sure everyone was taken care of and to let them know that she was thinking about them. The last card I received from her was a beautiful birthday card telling me that all my birthday wishes would come true.

That birthday I wished for her cancer to be cured.

And sadly the card lied to me about all my wishes coming true. Sure, I asked for a new coloring set and some new shoes and gratefully, those were all wrapped up for me in pink paper. The remedy for cancer was now left in the hands of the scientists and doctors.

Even with the terminal disease, Helene never let the cancer affect her ability to care for others. Even when walking from one side of the room to the other became a seemingly impossible task, she still asked if she could help with the dishes. Even when her hair was falling frantically on the floor from the chemo, she still wanted to feed the dog so her grandchildren didn’t have to stop playing. She wanted to be there for others. She made it her job to be the hands that lifted others up; and we couldn’t be more grateful.

Helene had breast cancer that spread throughout the rest of her body. It filled her veins and made its mark on her. But Helene didn’t let that stop her. She wasn’t going to let this cancer kill her. She wouldn’t allow it.

I remember being at my aunt’s house for my cousin’s eleventh birthday and Helene was able to show up, even with cancer on her back and Covid in the air. She was so excited that we were all going to be there, and she was even more excited to give my cousin her birthday gifts. After cake and presents, Helene, my cousins, and I all sat outside on the balcony. My aunt has this beautiful, large backyard that looks more like an enchanted forest than a lawn. Because of its massive size, it’s prone to a lot of wildlife, like birds, squirrels, and deer. Helene loved to see the deer at my aunt's house and even tried to go up and feed them when she had the chance. As we sat outside, a small baby deer appeared out from behind a tree. All of us just stared at its amazing beauty and Helene smiled at the creature. The deer’s small tail danced at the back of the timid body and looked to almost smile back. Not all friends have to be human. As we all sat outside, Helene looked at me and my two cousins. She looked at us and smiled, “Someday, I will have hair like you three. It doesn’t need to be perfect or beautiful or even all the same color. I just hope to grow some hair.” We all then replied with, “You don’t need hair to be beautiful, you are already so pretty.” Before she left for the night, she gave everyone the biggest hug we have ever had.

Helene was full of hope. Just one of her many amazing traits.

In the beginning of August, 2020, Helene got very sick. The hospital staff told her to just return home so that she could be surrounded by the people who cared about her the most. My aunt drove up to stay with her and left my cousin’s down in Souderton with my family and I. Two days later, my aunt arrived back at the house in tears and told us all to sit on the couch. It took less than twenty seconds for us to figure out that she had passed. The house filled with tears, anger, and grief; there were not enough hugs in the world to make the pain stop. My aunt said that she was in a better place, one without pain or cancer. That didn’t make any of us feel any better. We all cried for hours and called each other daily to see how everyone was holding up. Unsurprisingly, we all felt consumed by grief and sorrow. If Helene was there, she would hug us until the sun set or have us all say a prayer to the heavens to take care of the past soul. Even without her, that’s what we did.

A few months later, another birthday rolled around. At the dinner table, we all missed the wise words of Helene. We missed her smile and her laugh. We missed her. Everything about her.

That same day before we left my aunt’s house, we decided to do something special for her. There were five heart shaped balloons in the kitchen. One for each grandkid. My aunt also just so happened to have five black sharpies lying around her kitchen in different drawers. Each kid took a balloon and a sharpie and wrote a letter to Helene.

“Dear Heaven,” I wrote. “Tell Grandma Helene how much we miss her and how much we love her. Give her a big hug for us, please.” We all then went outside on the front lawn and stood in a circle.

“On the count of three,” I said, “we let go of the balloons.” I started to count down. “One… two… three!” We let go of the white strings at once and the balloons then soared in five different directions up high into the sky. A few tears were shed by our parents. We all then went along the back of the house to leave before something caught our attention. It trotted through the yard like it owned the place. A deer. Helene. At this point we all started crying and blew kisses up towards the sky. She got our messages.

I think about her often. No matter how long it’s been, there will still be a hole in my heart from when she passed. But, as I go through life, my intentions always stay the same; make friends wherever you go because you might just become someone’s Helene. And if you become anything like her, your life will be filled with nothing but happiness and love. We were all grateful for her. Cancer might have been her enemy, but her whole family fought alongside her, just like she would do for any of us.