2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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Gilda’s Club Essay

When I was seven my grandmother was diagnosed with stage three peritoneal ovarian cancer. Which was scary. That moment flipped my life around. This happened in November of 2015. She was treated at Fox Chase Cancer Center. I would occasionally stop by to see how she was doing and go to her chemo. After all, she is my grandmother and spoils me. So it was the least I could do.

Six months later my mother was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer. This was the starting point of something that would change my life forever. Now my mother and grandma had cancer at the same time. My life came to a stop. I was in second grade at the time, I didn't know what was going to happen, because I had always focused on baseball and swimming as a little kid. For being a little kid I was sometimes naive and just focused on myself.

This year I will be climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro with the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition (NOCC) to raise awareness for ovarian cancer. Mt. Kilimanjaro is the tallest mountain located in Tanzania. I will be climbing it with my brother, my mom, and my dad. When someone in your family has cancer. It’s not just them. It’s the whole family.

Before I found out my mom had cancer I was the happiest kid alive and I still am. With my brother and I we felt like we were unstoppable. We would do everything together, whether it was homework or having a catch with a baseball. Back then we both went to Belmont Hills Elementary School. Of course, since we’re twins, our parents had us separated in classes so our teachers could tell us apart.

About a whole month later my mom was formally diagnosed with cancer. I didn’t know at the time but it was gonna be a scary battle. The first I heard about it my parents told me that my mom was sick. When I was sick I thought it was just like the flu because I was eight at the time. Until I realized that my mom was really sick. She took off from work and started getting

chemo more frequently. It was scary for me because six months before this my grandma was diagnosed with cancer. In my mind I’m like they’re gonna beat it, it’s just a sickness.

Then in the summertime, she started going to the hospital regularly. When summer camp started, she was driving us. She had the window down and we were listening to my favorite song Party in the USA by Miley Cyrus. She had her hand on the window and pulled out hair. I didn't know at the time but the chemo was killing her from the inside. The chemicals were toxic and that she would soon become bald.

About one week later. It was that time. She was gonna get her head shaved in our bathroom. I remember the first stroke of hair gone she started to cry. But then she let us do a little. It was sad, but at least it was a turning point in her cancer treatment where she started to get better. One of my favorite quotes is when Life’s like an arrow and it drags you back,you can only go forward from there. And that's what started to happen.

Now that she was basically living in the hospital, we started to go with her. Curt and I would now bring a candy basket and when my mom got her treatment for chemo, we would walk around the hospital with her handing out the candy to other patients that might be feeling down. Then we started handing it to the nurses and doctors for all the great work they did to help save my mom and other patients alike. They are the real heroes of this world. If it wasn’t for them, I don't think my mom would be here today.

During this whole rollercoaster of adventures my mom and grandmother still were great at being parents. When I was young, I was scared of them dying and me growing up without a mom or grandma. But they were confident and persistent that they would make it out just for me. I think that’s what cheered me up was their confidence.

One day during my grandmother's chemo treatment my mom wanted me to go with both of them to the hospital. She said to me and my brother if you guys are good I’ll give both of you guys thirty dollars that you can spend on anything. Little eight year old me was up for the challenge. So we spent the day at the hospital and eventually got our thirty bucks. I was so happy because back then thirty dollars was a lot of money for me. I remember loving animals back then so I went to the pet store and got two pufferfish. Sadly they didn't make it because we didn't have the right water temperature for them. But at least my mom and grandmother survived, which is the most important thing.

Fast forward and my mom was on the day of her cancer removal. Which was one of the scariest moments of my life because I didn't know if I would ever see her again. I remember going into school that day not knowing what would happen. When it came to lunch time, I sat alone. And I remember just starting to cry. Everyone around me was confused because they didn't know my mom had cancer. Yet all of them asked if I was ok. When I got home the first thing I asked was if my mom was ok. My dad said everything went well and now it’s just a waiting game.

The day she went into remission was the best day of my life. I remember thinking to myself that we are finally done with this nightmare. But not completely because cancer could still come back. Some people have beaten it three or more times. So there's still that thought in the back of my head that we might have to deal with this again. That's why you should always treat your parents well because they will always love you and you don't know if you will ever see them again. Something I learned from my parents who have cancer is to not take them for granted and that you should spend as much time with them as you can before it's too late.

Now that my mom and grandmother have been in remission for over five years and we've been on so many adventures with my grandparents. Grandparents always spoil you. My family has supported me and I will always support them. I truly believe I hit the family jackpot lottery because I would not trade for anything even if it was for baseball gear. But baseball gear is temporary nd materialistic, while family is forever

Now it’s time to get ready for Mt. Kilimanjarowhich is roughly 19,000 feet high. You can’t just walk up that tall of a mountain. You have to build your stamina. And that’s exactly what my family is doing. We go on 5 mile long hikes with weighted backpacks so we are used to carrying that weight. But to be a great athlete you have to clean up your diet.

To go on this journey affected by cancer each person has to raise fifteen thousand dollars. Of course the money is going to a good cause because that money will be donated to the NOCC for ovarian cancer awareness and research. But we have to reach the goal so we can go on a trip. So what my family and I have been doing is selling Fritz’s sticky buns as a fundraiser, we are hosting a bowling tournament at Bowlero Bristol, and most importantly we have Phillies game worn World Series memorabilia that we're going to raffle off. It’s not going to be easy, but we'll get the job done. Just like my mom and grandma did when they fought cancer. This trip isn't just a regular trip. It’s to raise awareness for ovarian cancer and to educate people about the signs and symptoms of cancer. People don’t know ovarian cancer is known as the “silent killer” because people are misdiagnosed or not caught until it’s too late.

I don't want any other kid to be scared like me when my mom and grandmother were diagnosed. I don’t want other kids to see their mom’s hair fall out and go bald. I don't want other kids to grow up without a mom. I don't want Ovarian cancer to ruin a family. I hope all the

money we raise will help others and make a difference. I hope others will see us climb Mt. kilimanjaro and see that anything is possible.