



CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

Essay Contest

2nd Place Winner

Kenzie Matyszczak

Cancer Cannot Conquer Me

I can feel the rough carpet on the bottom of my feet. I hate this carpet. It's not soft enough. The overhead light in my mom's bedroom glares in my eyes. It's so bright I almost have to squint. My twin sister standing right next to me. She's so close to me I wish she would move over so I could have some space. Mom brought me and my sister into the room to tell us the devastating news. Snapping back to reality, the word "cancer" rings in my head. It's like an alarm blaring over and over again. "Cancer," I think to myself. I cannot explain what it is, since I am so young, but I know it cannot be good from my mom's cautious expression. She says she's going to be okay; everything will be okay. But why is she crying? I cannot comprehend how monumental this is. I just want her to be okay.

Learning about cancer was a top priority. In order to grasp what my mom was

dealing with, I had to first learn about what cancer was and how it affected her. Cancer Support Community in Warminster, formally known as The Gilda's Club, had a significant impact on my life. I can remember grabbing my little carpet square and heading to sit in a big circle and talk about the one thing that connected all of us in the room. One of my first memories of Gilda's involves a boy, a little older than me, playing with a hippo hand puppet pretending to eat my hair. I always had so much fun playing and talking with the other kids. I was able to discuss such an upsetting topic because the relationships built between me and the other kids, and me and the staff made me feel safe and secure. Learning about cancer can be hard for a five-year-old, but Cancer Support Community made it easy. Everything was explained in a way that I could understand. The comfortable atmosphere made it somewhere I always wanted to be. I always looked forward to Tuesday's because I was able to see all my new friends and learn about what was happening to my mom.

There were many ways I learned at CSC. Talking as a big group gave me a chance to hear others' thoughts and feelings, as well as get a chance to learn from them. I learned about what cancer is, cancer treatments, side effects of cancer, how cancer affected those that were diagnosed, coping mechanisms, and much more. I was able to gain an awareness that I lacked before CSC. Knowing that so many people are influenced by cancer, at varying levels, is very eye-opening. Not only did I learn from CSC, but I was given many opportunities to have fun. Throughout the years, I had the privilege of attending events at CSC and enjoying exciting activities at other locations. For instance, my family was gifted tickets to two Eagles games. I had a lot of fun with my mom and

sister. We met Vince Papale, Bill Bergey, and the Eagles cheerleaders. It was days like these that I was able to live in the moment and forget about the hardships my mom was facing at the time. We were also gifted tickets to the first ever concert I attended: Imagine Dragons. To this day, my mom and I talk about how cool the concert was and agree that it was the best one we have ever been to. Over the summers, my sister and I attended Camp Kids and Teen Camp. For a week during summer, we spent the whole day with friends participating in themed days. We partook in activities like making a hot glue wand, so we could be like the wizards in Harry Potter, or making make-shift lava lamps out of water, food coloring, and oil. I will never forget how intense our games of capture the flag got. Something that I will always be grateful for are the back-to-school nights. Getting my blue bag of school supplies including folders, paper, a pencil case, a binder, pencils, pens, notecards, erasers, earbuds, etc. was helpful because of our financial troubles at the time. One of my favorite things to attend were movie nights where I saw my friends and ate some good snacks. For Halloween this year, I went to the trunk or treat event with my mom and sister. We decorated our car in a spooky theme and handed out candy to all the kids. It was great seeing new faces, as well as old faces that I have not seen in a while.

One of the hardest things anyone can deal with is death. Death is hard to come to terms with, but CSC made it manageable. Being in a cancer support group inevitably means that people have cancer. Some will fight and try their absolute hardest to beat cancer, but their battle overcomes them. You can prepare for it, but it does not get easier. Saying goodbye to someone you love is one kind of pain that cannot accurately be put into words. I had the honor of knowing some members that have passed away. I feel lucky to have known them and think about them all the time. Knowing that they no longer have to fight and that they no longer feel any pain brings me peace. I will never forget my time with them and how they enriched my life.

I am forever grateful for everything that CSC has given me. Although cancer had to enter my life to join, I can say that the opportunities that arose from the devastating news of cancer, have created many occasions of happiness in my life. Even when I cannot make it to CSC, I am glad that a piece of me will always remain there, written with sharpie, on the entryway. My name stands alongside my lifelong friends' names, in the place that has influenced every aspect of my life.