



CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

Essay Contest

2nd Place Winner

Kya Matyszczak

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

I don't remember walking into Gilda's Club for the first time, but I do remember some of my earliest moments there. I remember sitting in a circle on the carpet with a group of kids I didn't know yet. The adults in the room were asking us to write things down about this word they kept mentioning- cancer. I was five at the time, so I didn't understand the weight of what that was yet, but I knew that it wasn't a good thing. I would write down the things I was expected to say, as I wasn't too affected by it yet. As I grew older and became friends with the other people who came to Gilda's Club for support, I learned more about how bad cancer could really be. I watched friends that I had made throughout the years lose their parents, with nothing I could do to help ease the pain. I was lucky enough to not experience the heartbreak that they went through, as my mom beat cancer and has been in remission for 13 years now.

I'm forever grateful that my mom has been cancer-free for so many years now, although there's always a bout of anxiety that comes with the thought that it could come back. Whenever

she experiences a pain of any kind, or feels a little under the weather, we get a little nervous, but we stay positive, and everything turns out alright.

There are countless stories about the bad things that come from having any type of cancer experience in someone's life, but good things can come from those experiences as well, although they're rarely talked about. I am so grateful to The Gilda's Club of Greater Philadelphia for assisting in some happy experiences that involve such a sad topic.

One of my favorite parts about being a part of Gilda's club was attending Camp Kids. Every day was a new theme, and we got to dress accordingly. A decent number of the themes were movie related, and we got to watch the movies while eating lunch every day, which was always made by very nice volunteers. We got to play games and do different activities all day, so there was never a dull moment. One of my favorite parts was the huge playground outside, where we would play games, such as capture the flag and man on woodchips. When I grew old enough, I became a camp counselor, and had the privilege of watching the kids that were once where I was. Even though I was watching over the children, it was still a lot of fun.

A few other fun things my family was able to participate in cooking events, egg decorating, and Christmas in July. I vividly remember a specific time when we made several batches of different kinds of cookies, and we got to take them home with us, along with the recipes so we could make them on our own. They never did end up as good as when the instructor helped, but it was still a fun activity. We also participated in decorating Pysanky, which was essentially decorating eggs with wax and dye. It's typically done by Ukrainians, which is part of my heritage, so it was cool to be able to participate in that. Christmas in July was another very exciting event, where we got to come to Gilda's Club and see Santa dressed in vacation clothes. Everyone received a gift and we got to use them with our friends.

Even with all the fun I had, I still learned a lot. I learned about what Cancer was, and how the disease works. I also learned how it effects the people it inhabits. Along with learning about cancer and how it works, I learned how to deal with the stress it brings into my life. Gilda's Club taught me about things such as dealing with change, how to solve problems, which are things important skills that I am still able to use today.

While some of the things I witnessed and went through were hard for me to deal with at such a young age, I'm glad that I went through it all regardless. I met some lifelong friends through this organization and I am forever grateful for it.