



CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2023 Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant

Essay Contest

3rd Place Winner

Samantha Schwartz

Healing with Cancer

My family has always been myself, my sister, my mom, and my dad. During some terrifying periods of our lives, we were worried this family would change drastically. Around 2015, my dad got a blood clot in his knee while working. When he was at the hospital to treat this blood clot, his doctor decided to do a lung scan because he knew my dad was a smoker. The doctor ended up saving my dad's life by making that decision. At this point, my dad had Stage 3 lung cancer. Without finding this, the cancer would have grown to Stage 4 and he would have passed away. The same incredible doctor checked his cancer for any mutations, which would allow them to explore other treatment options. My dad's cancer had a mutation that is commonly found in non-smoking Asian women, which was a huge shock. This allowed him to receive oral chemotherapy, which he still takes today. The mutation allowed the treatments to end sooner than expected, and soon enough my dad was in remission.

Years later, my dad started having memory issues. He was struggling to read books to my sister, he was forgetting names, and my family could tell there was a deeper issue than just simple forgetfulness. My mom made sure he got a brain scan, and sure enough the cancer metastasized to brain cancer, meaning it was now Stage 4 Lung cancer. While he still got radiation and chemotherapy, he was able to move to oral chemotherapy again. Once again, he is now in remission and has been doing pretty well ever since. We have to make sure he is very hydrated, because sometimes he becomes dizzy and forgetful because of dehydration. My family and I were incredibly grateful for my dad to have survived this, and we were able to overcome this together with our incredible support system.

Gilda's Club was introduced to my family by my friend whose mom is currently in remission for breast cancer. This support group gave my family a place to acknowledge our feelings about cancer with people who have gone through the same thing, while also giving us the opportunity to do activities and socialize to distract us from this disease. My sister and I were able to participate in the summer camp at Gilda's Club, which was a fond memory for us both. I was a volunteer counselor, and my sister was a camper, and she has now become a volunteer counselor. This camp gave us something to do for weeks in the summer, and I was able to get closer to my friend and her sisters who introduced me to the organization, while also getting to know new people. Being able to help kids going through the same thing as me have a fun summer is something I am so thankful I was able to participate in. The camp had so many fun activities, like playing on the playground, doing arts and crafts, having guests which included a liquid nitrogen demonstration, an ice cream truck coming to camp, and so many more. I am still close friends with people who I participated in this camp with, and so is my sister.

My parents have also met so many different people who can relate to them. They have also made many new close friendships that would not have been possible without the help of Gilda's Club. My sister and I even watched pets over the winter for a family we met through this organization, and we make time to see them and spend time with them. My family and I loved going to events together, such as the Winter Holiday Brunch with Santa and Hanukkah Harry. We were able to socialize with the other families and take beautiful holiday photos. We also love attending movie nights, cooking classes, other holiday events, and many more. Just this week my family went to the Easter egg hunt, and my sister was able to bring a friend with her. Gilda's allowing guests to be brought just increases the community and lets others feel welcome, even if they are not in the organization. An important part of the club for my family is the support group sessions, which we regularly attend. Being surrounded by people who have the shared cancer experience makes it easier to open up and helps us know we are never alone. We are also currently doing family meetings and reporting to Gilda's Club about these meetings. This helps us set time aside to all talk as a family about what we are going through and how we can support one another. This club has shown us in so many ways how we can help other people and each other through our entire cancer journey.

My dad also volunteers as a math tutor for kids that are in Gilda's Club. He consistently has been tutoring one kid for the past 3 or 4 years. Being able to help her with math is rewarding for my dad, especially because he knows her sister is going through cancer, just like he has. This tutoring allows him to keep an eye on his memory and intelligence, which helps my family know his brain is working well. My family has also become close with this family, which gives both families a new support system. Without this organization, we never would have had the chance to get to know this family and become close friends with them.

For a long time, my family was going through something very painful and we thought we would not be able to recover. Gilda's Club has given us so much support and care throughout our entire journey. We were given access to a space we are always welcome in, where we can talk to others who know what it is like to be in our position. We were also granted the opportunity to go to events to socialize by meeting new people, and becoming closer with people who we already knew. Lastly, we have learned how to better support each other as a family and we continue to grow everyday with the help of what Gilda's Club has given us.