2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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How Cancer and Adversity has Shaped my Life

The sky is a wide array of vibrant colors, coupled with white fluffy angelic clouds. All these clouds filled with little imperfections and differences that add to the overall image of sky. The sky also possesses endless opportunities as no one can bind it. It is boundless, it is colorful, it is deep, and it is who I am.

From a young age, I have always been an “anomaly”- one who deviates from the norm. As someone who was not on the growth chart up until my teenage years, it felt like life was stacked against me. At the age of one, I was diagnosed with “failure to thrive”; After years of visiting various pediatricians and physicians, the only words that were resonating in my head were “Tristan won’t grow”, “Tristan is lazy”, “Tristan can’t do this”, “Tristan will never be able to do this”, it was all Tristan this and Tristan that. Most of these comments would slip my mind and I do not even remember the worst of them, but there was one thing that remained consistent. I was being setup for failure.

For all the “can nots” in the distance of my mind, I could always hear my mother saying, “you can”. I can be whatever, and whomever I want to be because I make my own reality. Since then, I refuse to care and believe what other people think about me.

Adversity has played a key role in my life and for a while it hurt me. I realize now that in truth it has taught me how to adapt and grow as an individual. Through my many bouts with adversity, whether it was dealing with the fact my mom had an aggressive form of cancer, I have always managed to come out stronger.

I lived through my cancer journey; I remember the exact day and moment down to the minute detail; I was 6 years old and after a nice dinner my dad had pulled into a shopping center and my mom had looked back at me and my brothers. She said one phrase “guys can I tell you something?” and of course we all said yes. What she said next would change the course of the next two years; she said, “I have cancer.” Immediately after my younger brother screamed out “like the consolation”. My four-year-old brother meant constellation. We all laughed and enjoyed this shorth lived family time before it would all go away.

As soon as we got home, my mom started to go to the hospital and get treatment. She was home less and less and when she was home, she was in her room and kept herself away from all of us. The biggest change I noticed was her long beautiful hair and her big, beautiful smile had faded to dullness. My six-year-old self was as ignorant as could be and I would constantly ask her if the chemo or radiation therapy was turning her into the hulk. Even though my mother was going through cancer, she was still making an effort to look after me and my brothers. One day my mom just stopped coming home and for the next three months she would continue to not be home. She was undergoing treatment in the Penn Medicine Pearlman facility while my grandpa was taking care of me and my brothers. She went in for surgery and then stayed. She became gravely ill and did not respond to surgery well.

There was one time that I remember visiting my mother in the hospital. It was a very short visit but there is one thing that was obvious: my mom was a ghost of her old self. She had looked so frail and so worn out after all the rounds of treatment and many surgeries. I remember feeling powerless and all I had hoped for was that my mother would come home healthy once again.

While all of this was going on, there was one thing that served as a beacon of hope and a sort of relief, and that beacon was Gilda’s club. Gilda’s was a place that my brothers and I could go to be ourselves and feel understood; Everyone else at Gilda’s also had someone in their family going through cancer. It was a place of enjoyment, and every day we did things like team games, playground (RIP), and most importantly capture the flag. I was reminded that I was not alone in this journey and as the years continued Gilda’s has remained a part of my life. Even now as my mom is fully healthy, I still go to Gilda’s as a counselor to guarantee that the kids can have the same experience that I received and not have to worry so much about feeling alone in their journey.

Facing adversity in life taught me that I am the sky. I am filled with the “clouds” that resemble all the imperfections and diversity that make me unique. Also, there is no limit to the things I can do, and the things I can accomplish. I am the sky, and I always have been.