2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

3rd Place Winner

Marisa Nero

My Mighty Journey

Cancer can be a wonderful thing. Though cancer is known for death and sickness, it made me stronger. I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia on May 13, 2016. Cancer has been a part of my life since the age of seven. It is something that has made me stronger and the person I am today.

I was like any other normal 7-year-old girl; riding my bike, playing dress up, making arts and crafts, when suddenly I started to get extremely sick. I turned really pale, had a high fever, and had many cold symptoms. I would get better and a few days later would be running a fever again. I was tired all the time; I would be too tired to walk to the car when my mom would pick me up from school. Little did I know, these were the early symptoms of cancer. My mom and I went to the doctor to find out what was wrong. There, they checked my blood by pricking my finger. My finger wouldn’t stop bleeding. The doctor quickly came back in the room and told my mom I needed to be rushed to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia as soon as possible. I could see the worry on my mom’s face as the doctor told her. We then rushed to the hospital.

Since I was so young, I didn’t quite understand what cancer was. I was told my body was sick and that for it to get better I would need a surgery to get special medicine put into my body. I would later understand that this was a port placement surgery. At the age of seven, I didn’t comprehend a lot of what was happening, but I mostly understood that I would lose my hair and it made me nervous. Being bald made me insecure. I was scared I would get made fun of or pointed out in school. Sadly, at times people stared, but I knew I had the whole school rooting for me. I started to become more confident in myself.

I spent many of my days at the hospital. My hospital visits consisted of numerous lumbar punctures, port access for chemotherapy, long chemotherapy days, blood transfusions and more. I started to miss a lot of school but was lucky to have my teacher come after school hours a few times a week to get me caught up on what I was missing. Constantly being at the hospital could be boring but I always had my family by my side. I would spend a lot of my time in the playroom - playing games, making crafts, and making new friends. Cancer was now a part of my life, and I had the same schedule on repeat - hospital visits, chemotherapy, school, taking medicine, repeat.

Throughout my journey I was grateful enough to connect with some awesome organizations such as Kisses for Kyle, the B+ Foundation, Alex’s Lemonade Stand, Casey Cares, and others. They all helped me know that I was not alone in my fight, that there are many people just like me, wanting to live a normal kid’s life and they helped to make that possible. I slowly started to embrace myself.

It was hard going to school and growing up being known as the girl who has cancer. I underwent two and a half years of treatment from the young ages of seven to nine and a half. I didn’t let my cancer diagnosis affect or define me. Today, I shine bright for others, knowing I am not promised tomorrow. My message to all is to let your loving kindness show and make a difference in someone else’s life, because you never know what they are going through.

In closing, I know cancer affects many people in many different ways. I choose to be thankful for the lessons my cancer journey has taught me. I know that I have the strength and confidence to take on anything in my life and now have the perspective of what really matters in life – kindness, love, family, and friendships.