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**2024 Ben Straus Higher Education Grant Essay Contest**

**2nd Place Winner**

**Abigal Swenson**

**Finding Hope in Family and Community**

Cancer has affected my relationships with both my family and community. In 2016, at the age of seven, my younger sister, Maddie, was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL). At the time of her initial diagnosis, I was nine years old. Maddie is the middle child, born between me and our youngest sister, Isabelle. Isabelle was only four years old when Maddie started her cancer treatments. I have always strived to be the best sister I can be to both of my younger sisters. I have always had close relationships with my sisters, but I believe facing such adversity brought us even closer. I knew I had to find ways to bring joy to my sisters during difficult times. I learned magic tricks to entertain my sister when she could not leave her hospital bed. I went to doctor appointments with my sister and offered her care and support when needed. I helped both my younger sisters with schoolwork. I helped my parents around the house, as they were busy balancing work and my sister’s care. Through cancer, I learned to be responsible, compassionate, and empathetic. These characteristics are important because I use them in every aspect of my life. They affect my interactions with friends, my relationships with family and my interactions with employers.

Maddie was considered cancer-free at the age of ten and my family celebrated this victory. We felt very optimistic and were glad that this part of our lives was behind us. No one expected Maddie to relapse just three years later at the age of thirteen. It was difficult to process the fact that my sister had to face cancer a second time in her young life. During this difficult time, I had a crisis of faith. I wondered why this was happening to my family again. Why did she have to go through that pain again? It took time to accept the reality of the situation. I eventually accepted that my sister having cancer twice was something that was no one's fault. I found comfort once again in church. I found faith in the doctors caring for her and believed that the treatment she was receiving would heal her once and for all. Faith gave me a positive outlook on the future of my sisters' health and our family as a whole. I apply my faith and positivity to all aspects of my life. I value my faith and am grateful to find hope when faced with challenges. I live with kindness, a grateful heart, love, and positivity.

Through my sisters' cancer treatments, there was one place in our community that always made me feel supported. I was lucky to live just a few miles from The Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia (CSCGP). Cancer Support Community played a large role in supporting myself and my family during our cancer journey. I started going to Kid Support, where I learned more about cancer and found the language to express my emotions and the vocabulary to talk about the challenges facing my family. Most importantly I was learning these things right along with peers who were on their own cancer journeys. It made me realize I was not alone. I developed friendships with the other children who were in my support group. As I got older, I participated in the middle school STAC (Straight Talk About Cancer) program offered by CSCGP. This allowed me to talk about cancer along with my friends facing similar situations right at my middle school. Again, this made me feel a part of a community, knowing I was not facing my sister's diagnosis alone.

In addition to the support groups at CSCGP, I was offered many opportunities to engage in fun activities with my family. I fondly remember going to the Back to School party every year. My sisters and I would enjoy time with friends and leave with bags full of everything needed to start a new school year. We always had fun at the Trunk or Treat events. We decorated our car as a family and loved leaving with bags of goodies. As a family we have enjoyed learning how to make pies and perogies in the cooking classes offered at CSCGP. The cold winter season was always made warmer with gingerbread house decorating and my family adores attending the holiday brunch every year. My sisters and I look forward to the CSCGP egg hunt every spring. We have had the pleasure of horseback riding and enjoyed movie nights with our family at CSCGP. These opportunities allowed my family to enjoy time together and participate in fun activities without any financial responsibilities.

The support I received from Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia did not stop there. They also provided me with a tutor to help me through some very challenging math curriculum. I was paired with a cancer survivor who was dedicated to meeting with me weekly and together we tackled algebra and geometry. With the support of the CSCGP tutoring program and the kindness of my tutor, I was able to excel in my high school math curriculum.

My sisters and I looked forward to attending summer camp at CSCGP every year. I started as a camper and eventually was able to volunteer as a camp counselor for CSCGP. This camp offers support to families facing cancer. For the past five summers, I had the opportunity to work with children between the ages of five to twelve years old. I love working with the kids and creating an environment where they can forget about cancer for a while. I was able to be creative and help with crafts and develop games and theme activities for the campers. In my role as a camp counselor my leadership skills developed and the experience helped me to become a clear communicator, enhanced my problem-solving skills, and allowed me to develop positive working relationships with my fellow counselors. These skills have helped shape me into the person I am today.

Cancer has changed all aspects of my life, and the Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia has played a large role in helping me grow. I am grateful for the opportunity to graduate high school. I am excited to see what the future brings as I start my college education. I do not take these milestones for granted, as I know not everyone is given the same opportunities. I appreciate my health and ability to participate in life and grow into adulthood fully. I appreciate that my sister is by my side, and I look forward to creating many more memories together.

Without cancer, my family and my community would be extremely different. Without cancer, my life experiences would have been altered. Without cancer, I wouldn’t be who I am today.