A close-up of a sign

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**2024 Ben Straus High School Teen Essay Contest**

**Honorable Mention**

**Abigal Swenson**

**Family, Faith and Community**

Cancer has affected my relationships with my family, my faith, and my 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 were feeling 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 sister’s health and our family as a whole I apply my faith and positivity to all aspects of my life. I value my faith and follow the commandments set in place by my religion. I live with kindness, a grateful heart, love and positivity.

Within our community, I found comfort in charity work and volunteering to give back all the kindness given to my family. I volunteered with THON, Kisses for Kyle and Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia, and participated in the CHOP Parkway Run and Walk for 9 years. My favorite volunteer opportunities came from Cancer Support Community Greater Philadelphia. 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. I have used the skills I developed volunteering in my position as a waitress in a retirement community.

Cancer has changed all aspects of my life from my newfound up-close magic abilities to my enhanced leadership skills. 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, my faith, 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.