

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

**Avery Daniels**

**My Grief Tastes Like A Burger King Bacon Cheeseburger**

I stuck my head out of his maroon pick-up truck. There were only two seats in his truck, so my car seat was fastened right next him. The wind lightly blew across my face, messing up my ringlet curls with every gust. My grandpa picked me up from school every day, so it was always just him and I. He let me blast whatever song on the radio and he would look over smiling as I belted the wrong lyrics. We were taking the familiar route from my school to our favorite place, Burger King. Its red, yellow, and blue sign became a normal sight to my five-year-old self. When Grandpa rolled down the window, he let me scream my order to the workers, “Can I please have a bacon cheeseburger and French fries.” It was my go-to, what can I say? He would then follow up with basically the whole menu, from French fries to whoppers to my grandma’s favorite, onion rings. Immediately when we received our food I put on my Burger King crown, feeling like the queen of fast food (every child’s dream), before we went back to eat with my grandma.

 The whole countertop in their Irish Pub inspired room was filled with fast food. The three of us would eat every last bite together. Then we would do it again the next day and the day after that. It became our “thing”, until I finished pre-k and moved schools for kindergarten. I only saw them for family parties or occasional day visits to watch Philly sports games and swim in their pool after that. Splashing in the pool, my grandpa would look at my sisters and I, and give that same memorable smile.

 In 2019, my own smile was wiped clean from my face. My mom told my sisters and I that my grandpa was diagnosed with cancer in his throat. She tried to explain everything to us, so we were prepared for the times we would visit, and he would look or sound different. After multiple surgeries, I could barely hear his voice anymore. Years would go by, and he would get better, and then much worse, but never show it. He battled his cancer internally, trying to contest with my grandma, my mom, and my aunts, that he was strong enough to do things on his own. That did not last very long, and my aunts and mom took turns taking him to his appointments and chemo treatments. At one of our family parties, my aunt mentioned that he was cold from his chemo treatments because the blankets he was given were paper thin. I decided to help him, like he always helped me.

 For his 70th birthday in October of 2022, I made him a Phillies no-sew tie blanket. On one side it was the Philadelphia Phillies themed and the other was the Philadelphia Eagles. At this point in his treatment, his voice was basically gone, and he lost a lot of weight. When he gave me a hug, I knew that this would be the last birthday I would celebrate with him. A couple of months later, we found out that the treatment was not working, and he would be put on bed rest. The news felt like a shot in the heart, but I did not want to let it sour the last few months I had with him. My family and I started visiting more, especially to watch the Eagles games with him.

 One day, I came home from picking up my little sister from a sport’s practice and I saw my mom sitting on our dining room stairs. She was still in her military uniform from work, but it was later than she was normally home. When I looked at her, I saw swollen red eyes and a woman holding back more tears. I knew. She hugged my younger sister and I as she told us the news. The three of us sat there, frozen in each other’s arms and a pool of tears. My family made our way to each other in our parents’ room. It was there that my dad told me about the moment he broke down that day. My mom and dad went to my grandparents’ house to help my grandma and aunts say goodbye to his corpse before he was moved. Except when my dad saw him, he was peacefully wrapped in the Phillies blanket that I made him. As he told me, tears were rolling

down my face, one after another, until my shirt was soaked. I realized in that moment that even though I did not get to say goodbye to him, a piece of me comforted him as he left.

 It has been almost a year since he passed, but I still feel his presence wherever I go, especially when I get a bacon cheeseburger and French fries from Burger King.