A close-up of a sign

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

**Honorable Mention**

**Avery Kohler**

**A Little Boy Who Taught Me So Much**

It’s no secret that cancer is an incredibly difficult illness for anyone to go through, but I’ve found it extra difficult as a teenage girl.

I don’t get to see friends and family as often, I can’t go out in public very much, and can no longer participate in dance due to my left side being partially paralyzed. The reason my precautions are so strict is because on October 26, 2023, I had a Stem Cell Transplant which involved extremely intense chemotherapy that wiped out my whole immune system.

I can’t explain how jarring it was to see some of my blood levels, such as platelets, at 0. Due to this the rules on the BMT (Bone Marrow Transplant) floor of the hospital were pretty strict. I had to take a ‘bath” (a wipe down) every day, wash my hands all the time, and could only leave my room masked and only for a few minutes. Although my mom stayed with me the entire 34 days I was admitted, with my dad and sister visiting most days, it was easy to feel so alone.

My mom had found another mom who had a 10-year-old boy whose transplant day was just a few days away from mine! Despite him being 5 years younger, with a different type of cancer, I found immense comfort knowing there was another kid just a few doors down experiencing the same type of transplant. His mom told mine that he was really into a game called “Roblox” which I had played before. A few days later he slipped a paper under my door that had his username on it! As the days went by, I grew more and more sad, bored, and stressed waiting for the OK to go home. I stayed in contact with friends and family by texting and facetiming, but it just wasn’t the same as seeing people in person.

One feeling I was not expecting to feel was guilt. I felt guilty that my mom had to leave home for over a month with me. I felt guilty that people were worried about me. I felt guilty that my dad had to extra hard on our farm to be able to have time to visit me. I even felt guilty if I had to ask my nurse for anything. Yes, it is their job, but it’s easy to feel like a burden when you have many needs.

About halfway through my stay my mom said that the little boy’s mom texted her and he wasn’t doing too well. His counts were low and he was having breathing troubles. This worried me, but I was hopeful that he would be able to recover. I distracted myself by doing art with the art therapist, music with the music therapists, and yoga with the yoga therapist. Even so, at night when it was time to settle down, I couldn’t stop the racing thoughts about the boy. I was imagining 10-year-old me going through a transplant. Blood draws at least once a week, Vitals being taken every 3 hours, pokes and prods, scans and the risk of something going wrong. I was so lucky.

You may be thinking “Lucky?! How could a teenage girl be lucky to get cancer twice?”. Well, I was lucky because I had an amazing and healthy 15 years of life before my diagnosis. I have family and friends checking in on me constantly. My family has enough money, and resources, to handle all my medical expenses. So, in reference to some kid’s situations, I would say I am pretty lucky. I continued through my admission and quickly learned that setting goals for myself helped the time to go faster. Luckily the BMT floor had a system where you could earn “BMT bucks” for completing tasks throughout the day. Things like brushing your teeth, getting your daily bath, and getting up and moving, which can be hard during admissions. But the BMT bucks kept me motivated. Your BMT bucks could be traded in for prizes (things like gift cards, fidget toys, etc.) I ended up going home with a cool light for my room and two visa cards!

The days continued, each day being similar. That is, until one morning when my counts were finally high enough to go home! I was overjoyed, and so were my friends and family. I made it home and was so proud of myself! Although I still couldn’t go out in public, or see all my friends, I was able to sleep in my own bed, something I previously took for granted.

However, this joy quickly faded. One unsuspecting day my mom came up to me while I was watching TV. She was reading something on her phone and had a sorrowful look on her face. Her eyes began to water as she told me that the little boy had passed away. I instantly felt my stomach drop. We both began to cry as a million questions filled my head. “Why?” taking up the most space. I don’t understand why the little boy’s life was cut so short. Or why his family had to go through such gut-wrenching and unexpected grief. I don’t think I will ever stop asking those questions or accept that there is no answer.