A close-up of a sign

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

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**Dark Times & Prayers**

December 28, 2020, my mom and dad called me downstairs saying, “We need to talk to you,” I thought I was in trouble or maybe I forgot to empty the dishwasher. But nothing could have prepared me for what she had to say to me. I sat in silence as she told my brother and I that she had been diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. Three days after Christmas my mom got diagnosed. That night I cried and I prayed that my mom would be okay and that we’d make it through it. The next few days came and we shaved her head. I will never forget that night. I couldn’t bring myself to go outside, let alone downstairs to see my mom. It was something I just couldn’t bear to do. I hadn’t even processed the fact that she had cancer yet. One might think it isn’t that big of a deal to shave someone’s head, but to me, it was a lot to try and handle and it would’ve pushed me over the edge if I went out of my room to see my mom. It took a day or so for me to accept it and start to try and help around the house.

January and February were some of the hardest months of my life. School was even harder, “does anyone have any questions?” I did. I had way too many. Why my mom? What is this happening? Am I still going to have a mom? I struggled throughout the entirety of my seventh-grade year. People would make fun of me for wearing a mask and I’d be questioned why every day and every day I had to explain to those people why. Some listened and stopped, and some apologized. But most stopped after a week or so because they knew what was going on. Some even stayed away from me to decrease my chances of getting sick. School was one of the only places I could be away from the cancer and focus on something else. It was hard to gain that focus though. I worked hard and talked to teachers whom I trusted, and they helped me a lot to get my education back on track.

In February, my mom had a double mastectomy. I had no idea what that was, but it scared me to death because all I knew was that it was a surgery, and a big one if my mom was to survive. It was scary seeing her go to that surgery and I was worried that something could’ve gone wrong because anything could happen. It could’ve been worse than it was before, it could be untreatable, things like that crossed my mind that day and night. Again, I prayed. I prayed more in 2021 than in every other year of my life. I did things I didn’t think I would ever do again that year. But yet I now understand how something tragic can control a person’s emotions.

Along with my mom’s cancer, I had to take a lot of responsibility around the house which was another thing to add to the pressure I was under. I cleaned, I helped cook, and I did everything my mom did. My brother Miles learned how to cook his own food, clean the bathroom, and do the dishes. My mom was always tired. She was always in bed which was hard for me to see a lot of the time. Part of it was not seeing her around and part of it was knowing she could be in pain. I never understood why other than the obviousness of the surgeries but otherwise, I had no clue what was going on and I was utterly terrified to ask because I only thought of the worst, and because of that, I didn’t want to even know.

After all of the difficult surgeries, my mom started chemo and radiation. I never understood what they were or what they did, which added to the list of fears I had. I somewhat understood what radiation was because I was watching a TV show in which the main character had cancer, but otherwise, I had no idea. All I wanted to know was if my mom was going to be okay. Every day of chemo and every day of radiation, I prayed for my mom; every day and night, until it was over. My mom finished radiation on October 25th which closed out all the treatments. My mom is okay. I prayed that night. I thanked God for everything he had done to keep my mom safe and alive.

Along that long journey, I met tons of friends who understood me and what I went through. I also got to go to different groups that gave us things to do, such as Cancer Support Community. One of the groups, For Pete’s Sake, allowed us to go on a respite so my family and I could get our minds off of cancer and onto something fun and cheerful. We met some new friends on that respite who pointed us toward Cancer Support Community. Going to the events and the things for kids opened my eyes and allowed me to meet some really good friends with whom I can talk to about my experiences and connect with. Having seen and heard what cancer does has changed my perspective on life entirely, it scarred me and now I have to handle that for the rest of my life. But throughout all those dark times, I prayed, and I still pray to this day. I pray for all the ones we’ve lost and for the families who know or have lost someone to cancer.