A close-up of a sign

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

**2nd Place Winner**

**Izabel Fronc**

**The Smile that Illuminated the Darkness**

The relentless smile that decorates my face was more than just a habit - it was a gift, a lighthouse in the storm that was about to consume my world. Little did I know that the simple act of curving my lips upward would become my anchor, my life raft, as the crashing waves of cancer threatened to pull my family under.

Cancer arrived unannounced, an unwelcome intruder. My mother's diagnosis felt like a betrayal by life itself. How could this happen to someone so vibrant, so full of love and light? In those early days, smiling felt like cruel mockery in the face of such darkness. Yet, something deep within me refused to surrender that simple gesture of hope. As the surgeries piled up and the cancer kept resurfacing, the smile became an act of defiance. Each time my mother emerged from the operating room, I was there, beaming through the tears. My smile said, "We will not surrender. We will fight." In the waiting room that smile united us, her hand in mine, our souls intertwined in wordless communion.

The first chemo session fell cruelly on my birthday. An ominous gift, had I not chosen to accept the blizzard that nature bestowed that day. As the toxic chemicals seeped into my mother's veins, I reminded myself that life's harshest seasons give way to renewals undreamed of.

With each treatment cycle, a smile became our family's emblem of perseverance. Where words failed, it spoke resilience into existence. On my mother's darkest days, I was there, grinning at her, as if to will her body's rebellion against the chemical onslaught. My smile was a lighthouse, beckoning her spirit back to the shores of health.

Protecting that smile was the greatest battle. Alone in my room, I would slump into the abyss, haunted by visions of a future without my anchor. Tears became sweet reminders to appreciate each breath my mother took. In those still moments, my agony and pain breathed freely, only to be promptly tucked away - a silent vow to never let the storm within capsize our family's vessel of hope.

Slowly and gradually, my smile transformed from a tactic into a profound source of strength. Where it once shielded me from pain, it became the very lens through which I beheld the world. Ordinary sunsets morphed into kaleidoscopic splendors, blazing their defiance at the dying of the light. My smile was no longer just a tool of encouragement for my mother; it became the compass that guided me through the windswept landscape of my inner life. Each upturned curve of my lips carved new neural pathways, retraining my frazzled mind to focus on the "light, brilliant and bright" as Amanda Gorman's words so beautifully summon.

In those trembling days, my smile bestowed humanity's most profound gift - community. It became a beacon that drew in the nurturing embraces of loved ones. Strangers, too, were uplifted by this simplest outward expression of an unshakable inner joy. Connections blossomed from the fertile soil of a smile's roots, creating a tapestry of support that could warm even cancer's chill breath.

With each laugh traded, each grin shared, our smiles became the threads that knit together the tattered fabric of our family. Mother, father, siblings, grandparents - each found support and strength in that simple upward tug of hope. We rallied as a clan, held up by one another's smiles. When my mother finally finished her treatments, radiant and renewed, it was a smile that had helped her regain her strength.

My experience with cancer did not make me frown over the suffering. Instead, it taught me to smile at the breathtaking beauty inscribed in every beat of our borrowed hearts. That simple curve of flesh redirected my gaze beyond the temporal, allowing joy to eclipse the temporary shadows.

In smiling, I did not grow despite the circumstances; I grew because of them. Cancer's chill embrace sent me toward warm, renewing truths: Loved ones are the greatest treasures. Community is our floating device in the stormiest seas. And while darkness will always rise to challenge light's reign, a smile beams with the power to cast it aside, reminding all who bear witness that human spirits remain eternal, brilliant, and bright.