A close-up of a sign

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

**Jenna O’Hara**

**You Don’t Know What You Have Until You Lose It**

“You don't know what you have until you lose it.” A classic quote that can be applied in a plethora of ways: the easy times in kindergarten, old friendships, a past class. Despite the commonality of this quote, people never really understand it until they *do* lose something.

All my life, I knew I had guardian angels. My Uncle Frank had passed away a few years after I was born from cancer, and even though I didn’t know him too well, his memory lived on in the stories my dad would tell of him. My mom would always recount stories of her best friend, whom I called Aunt Susan, who also died of cancer when I was young. I never truly understood the impacts of these losses as I did not have a deep, close relationship with either of them. I just understood that they were always watching over me.

At about 12 or so, I had grown into a more mature child. 12 year olds are the ones who *think* they know everything; “I’m a teenager now, I can run the world!” But little do they know, they *don’t* know everything; I certainly did not. I had only really experienced one major loss in my life, which was my grandmother, who passed when I was 7. Even then, I was too young and immature to truly understand loss-- I felt it, I knew my family felt it, but I didn’t *understand* it. I wouldn’t understand it until I *was* 12, when tragedy struck my family, most notably, my grandpa.

My grandpa was an admirable man. He lost his father at the young age of 5 and was raised by his mom and grandfather. From serving in the military, to putting himself through college, to getting married, and raising two kids, my grandpa was a hardworking man. He was a great father to my mother and aunt, but he was an even better grandfather to his grandchildren. Going to all our events, supporting us through everything, dog sitting during our trips; he always took care of us and loved us. He was a great father-in-law to my dad, welcoming him to the family and even teaching him how to fix certain things. My grandpa taught us all the important life lessons- how to be kind, helpful, and loving. Everyone who knew my grandpa would say how adorable he was, how caring, kind, funny. No one ever had a negative complaint about him. He was the kind of man that a mother would want her son to grow up to be like. My mother did-- she named my brother Sam Theodore O’Hara, taking his first name for her son’s middle name.

My grandpa did, however, have the unfortunate case of having skin cancer twice, and had to have a piece of his ear removed. After that battle, he then received the diagnosis of bladder cancer which meant removal of his bladder, which was replaced by an ostomy bag. He endured radiation and tuberculosis therapy to treat the cancer.

In 2018, a big change occurred-- moving to a retirement home after 59 years in the same house. My grandparents were getting older, and my grandmother was having falling incidents more and more. My parents decided it was time for a new beginning, and that happened with Riddle Village. In a few months, the two settled in. We frequently visited for lunch or dinner on the weekends, and my grandpa slowly started to like it there. He joined clubs and made new friends. However, good things don’t always last as long as we want them to.

Cancer struck him once again, this time breast cancer (only 1% of breast cancer patients are men). He had to go through surgery and chemotherapy again. During his recovery, the COVID-19 pandemic hit all of America hard: stores closed, hospitals were shut down, families were separated. Our family was no exception to this. In March of 2020, the beginning of the pandemic, my grandpa wasn’t acting himself. After a long awaited appointment at the doctor’s, my grandpa ended up in the hospital, a combination of low resistance due to cancer treatments, and an infection. After a week in the hospital with only electronic contact from family, my grandpa returned to Riddle Village where he found my grandma in skilled nursing care due to a fall while he was gone. Both spent the next week recovering in skilled nursing together. My grandpa then was rushed back to the hospital due to low oxygen levels. We suspect he also contacted COVID at the last hospital stay. He spent his last week all alone, except for the wonderful nursing staff, in the hospital, due to no visitors because of COVID. After valiantly battling 3 types of cancer, he lost his battle in a lonely way.

That day ended up being the least ordinary of my life. The days after were blurry, and I can’t recall much other than tears and heartbreak. I couldn’t even say goodbye to him, tell him that I loved and cared for him, and neither could my family. It hit my mother the hardest-- she is a strong woman, but something like this could not keep her composed. My grandma couldn’t say goodbye to her husband, whom she had been married to for 61 years. She was left a widow, all alone to grieve in the care of the nurses because of the restricted visits.

That day, I gained another guardian angel. I am reminded by my mother that he is everywhere. I see him in the candy jar, where he would sneak candy into his pockets. I see him in his dog, Ben, who we now take care of. I see him as I drive in the car that was once his, sitting in the same spot. I truly didn’t know what I had until I lost him. He was a role model, an inspiration, but most importantly, my family, *my grandpa*. It is true-- “You don't know what you have until you lose it.”