

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

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**Tall Tales and Tumors**

There is no particular cancer that runs in my family, but it has struck twice with those closest to me. I had my first experience dealing with someone so close to me battling with cancer at an age so young I couldn’t understand what any of it meant. My grandmother on my mother's side was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and had lost her battle before I was even in kindergarten. As I look back I only have fragments of how it affected my life, vague memories here and there of being pulled from school for grief counseling and the day I came home and she wasn’t there, but I thought it was just something of my past until spring of 2023. Hearing the news that some suspicious tissue they found in my mother was actually breast cancer brought me back to when I was 5 years old, and despite the years that passed it made just as much sense to me as it did the first time.

 Growing up in a house with two parents who have worked in the hospital makes medicine sound like a fantasy world for grownups. The hospital was an imaginary location that my parents went to when I got dropped off at school, and all the illnesses and injuries they witnessed were like tall tales. As I have gone through life my mother has continued to push me towards a career in medicine, and as I had considered a serious path I may want to take oncology still lay in the realm of fairytales. Studying cancer was something that you only see in commercials when they are asking for your donation, and having a close encounter with cancer was something that couldn't possibly happen in my family because none of us smoked. Even my memories of my grandmother felt more like a story I read in a book than a lived experience.

The late winter into spring of 2023 felt like something fundamental inside of me changed which began to help me find where my true passions lie. I was performing what felt like every other week at some music festival, I was diving into my love for crochet, and what felt like 7 years of not understanding anything in AP Chemistry finally changed into loving what I was studying. Everything finally felt right after years in school drifting from one vague interest to another, yet there was not *the* one conversation shattered my world with my mother announcing that she had cancer. My whole family was aware that she decided to go in early for a mammogram and just to be safe they wanted to biopsy some suspicious tissue, and even if she never told us directly our house’s walls are so thin you can hear everything she said on the phone anyways. My father has also had various non-serious skin cancers cut out of him throughout the years so the topic was not some big taboo. I wasn’t sitting down to have her share the devastating news through tears, rather I overheard the tears as she got the news on the phone as I was in my room. When I think back to it, it was even my father who sat my younger sister and I down to ask if we had any questions or concerns about the operation they were going to perform to remove the mass. Though it was an awful realization that shook me to my core, I wasn’t concerned at the beginning because everything I heard about the cancer told me it was going to be ok. It was recent, had not spread anywhere, and it would be easily treated with an operation and then a series of radiation to make sure it did not come back.

The fact that my mother was living with cancer did not cross my mind for the month or two leading up to the operation because I couldn’t let it. I couldn’t let myself sit there and wallow about something that wasn't even my illness, especially when my life was finally working out. The doctors say she will be ok, and they're the ones who studied this in school so if they don’t worry I won't. There was, however, one issue with her surgery that had nothing to do with the operation itself: the date it was scheduled for. The operation to remove her tumor was scheduled for early May, which just so happened to be right after all the huge end-of-the-year activities. As my stress built up around ending the school year, the stress of her cancer diagnosis weighed heavier and heavier on me. As another group was performing during our school’s spring concert, I saw her sitting front row to enjoy our show and I couldn't help but burst into tears. As I studied for AP testing and the SAT, I couldn't help but wonder if it was more worth it working on that or spending time with her. It had all built up inside me until the day her operation was scheduled for was the day of an AP Chemistry test because my teacher didn’t have time to give it before our exam and was the day after I had to report another student for hate speech. I wanted to stay strong for her, but in that moment I felt like I had no option but to “use the cancer excuse” to give myself a piece of mind. Little did I know, it was no excuse, and it is something that has always affected me more than I can realize. The kindness of others at school hearing of my situation coupled with the collective emotional support of my family helped me make it through, and in the end, my mother woke up from her operation with not a single cell from that tumor left in her body.

I still do not know what cancer is, how it mutates, or how it eats away at the healthy tissue around it, but I know what it does to people. I've seen the scars, the radiation centers, the CVS orders, and I’ve felt how it affects people’s lives with the emotional intelligence to understand what is going on. I haven’t learned what all the oncologists spent years studying for, but I’ve learned that you need to be kinder to yourself when it is honestly affecting how you interact with the world. The fairy tales that once ran around my head are now movie biographies that sit in my brain’s archives, and I have to remind myself, that the stories we hear and tell as precautionary tales were probably once real people too. The 5-year-old who wasn’t sure how to process everything happening can finally rest now that I have experienced, endured, and made it through the big bad monster named cancer.