A close-up of a sign

Description automatically generated

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

**Honorable Mention**

**Keira Drissel**

**Hemoglobin Level 12**

It strikes your boyfriend’s mom on a Saturday morning, the day he plans on asking you to Prom. It struck the little kid that you went to Elementary school with, the one whose smile made you think cancer didn’t stand a chance with him, yet when he died, you asked, “Why him? Why not me”? It didn’t stop with the sweet girl whose grandma came to your door and said, “She came down with sepsis, it wasn’t the cancer, honey. Don’t be afraid.” You got a taste of it for yourself December 8th, 2017, what a night.

A month earlier in ballet class, I was at the barre doing plies. My friend asked, “Does it hurt?” as my legs shook violently trying to bring me up from the standard grand plie position, where your legs bend and your arm extends to let your fingertips sweep the floor. My fingertips knew that floor. The dust, the many late nights, the music flowing through my body after long days at school, every tension melting with the swift playing of those ebony and ivory keys. One day, my mom walked in to pick me up as I was finishing up at the barre. I thought to myself, “they think I don’t notice”, but my teacher gave my mom a look- not the your hair looks like a rats nest look, or even a “hey, nice to see you!” look, no, it's one that says the inevitable. As if the blueness in her eyes were to say, “I’m so sorry, something is definitely wrong, and it’s not good”. Fast forward a couple weeks, I am at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia with my mom and dad. I’ve been having terrible leg pains. At first, we thought it was just growing pains, it seemed like a viable answer for a young girl already a good head taller than the rest of her friends. But they wouldn’t go away. I’m losing sleep because of them. I pulled out all of my dance stretches that I had up my sleeve, but none brought relief. “See this rash on her legs right here?”, the doctor asks. “This is called HSP. It can cause rashes due to inflammation of the small blood vessels in her skin. It’s not serious, there’s no need to be worried. Her blood work looks great.” he finishes. And with that, we were on our way. My parents seemed happy. Relieved, maybe. But I wasn’t, I just didn’t know how to say it. I’m no doctor, anyway. I just knew this was not what I had. It was something more serious. Something was wrong with my body. Many more blood tests go by, all looking good. We determined that I didn’t have Mono, Lymes disease, thyroid problems, the list goes on. I stumbled out of the phlebotomist’s office, banging into the doorframe from my blurry vision and threw up in the parking lot, but I’m ok. It’s just HSP.

The Leukemia decides to present the day of my recital. I wake up with blood on my pillow, jaundice and sweaty. I can’t grip my water cup, and when I get up, it hurts too much to walk. Blood runs down my nose for the first time in my life. My family’s Pediatrician gets me in right away. But he, too, can tell. This is no HSP. We make our way to the emergency room where we wait for three hours. I adopt a new name for it, namely, the Eventually Room. When I am finally taken back, the doctor’s voices are serious. They give me breathing tubes and heavy pain killers of which I throw up. Next thing I know, I am in an ambulance being transported to CHOP. As my mother has said, “My eyes filled with tears as I realized when the flashing lights went on that all the cars were parting for my daughter”. The diagnosis came shortly after. Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. My first question was if I was going to lose my hair. I had always loved Rapunzel, and I wanted to have long, beautiful hair like she did. I was newly eleven years old, old enough to understand, young enough to be so confused as to why this was happening. The way it was explained, the bad cancer cells invited the good cancer cells to a party, where they all turned bad. Why? What did I do to deserve this?

The next three years, I battled with everything I had. I was able to make it back to school and dance, but CHOP was my new home. It wasn’t scary or daunting anymore, it was the place where angels in scrubs walked around providing love and comfort to such hurting families. It was the place that saved my life. I am a survivor now, praise the Lord. Without a doubt, my heart goes out to all the kiddos who are in the thick of it. That is why, and especially because I can’t see myself doing anything else, I am on track to be a nurse in the future. Specifically, Pediatric Oncology. Because those who are most curious about the world should be able to grow up and explore it. My heart goes out to all the kids who struggle with Chemotherapy complications like I did. I remember waiting for the Red Cross to deliver more blood for me so I could get my next round of treatment. The blood clot in my head. The twice a day injections that followed. The anaphylactic reaction. My dads face as he walked into a room with tons of nurses in a panic, swarming his daughter. The sepsis attack the night the Eagles won the superbowl. Waking up in the PICU and feeling violently ill at the sight of toast, being unable to accept flowers from my pastor. It is for these reasons that I go to CHOP for mentorships, learning the very basics of nursing. Because it was the place where my medical journey began, and it is where I want to help others with theirs. I bring awareness into the community. I am a Dance Hope Cure ambassador, and I set up and organized a hair donation station at my school’s mini Thon, where about a dozen highschoolers and community members and myself all got fresh 10 to 12 inch cuts for the night. Cancer sucks, but it brought me close to my friends from Ronald McDonald camp and showed me where people need help, where awareness is to be raised. It kills me to see young, innocent kids relapsing in their parent’s arms, knowing they are only getting 4% government funding for research. My cancer journey goes with me everywhere I go, because I carry it in my heart. Just recently, I was touring Villanova thanks to a Ronald McDonald scholarship when I overheard that they were holding their mini Thon fundraising and dancing event. Naturally, I had to go. My mom and I walked in and took a look at the #For The Kids wall. I got chills as I took a deep look and found my name right there in front of me. Spelled my way, written by a stranger. My mom and I listened to a tear- jerking story from a father whose son passed away from cancer. I got goosebumps as he said his son took his last breath in his daughter’s arms. I will never understand how I made it out alive, one port scar on my body, some chemo brain for sure, but no significant damage. I am so extremely lucky and blessed, but some kids and adults are not so fortunate. We must fight for them just like I had a whole army of people behind me. Cancer strikes. Like lightning, sharp and electrifying. But it lights up the community. Nobody hesitates to reach out a hand when they hear of a cancer diagnosis. They say it takes a village, so here we are. This is cancer, but we CANsurvive. Cancer. It’s a five letter word. It feels weird to say, and it hurts to hear. But you always have a choice, and we chose to fight.

Personal letter to Leukemia: Dear Leukemia,

You suck, but thank you for bringing me closer to my friends and family. For helping me to see the world of people that support me no matter what and for reminding me what a strong girl I am. I do not thank you, however, for all the pain and worry you have put me and the people that love me through. I’m happy to say that the Chemo is over, but you have left a permanent mark on my life. One that is fierce enough to make sure no other child has to go through you. In the end, though, I kicked your butt. And whatever happens, no one fights alone!