A close-up of a sign

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

**1st Place Winner**

**Lauren Charlton**

**Driving Force**

At fifteen I lost my father to lung cancer. For years, I watched my father undergo chemotherapy, radiation, surgeries, and clinical trials. It was devastating to watch the deterioration and impact of treatment on my father. Despite all challenges of being a cancer patient, my father refused to lose any sense of hope or positivity in the process. During a weekly Gilda’s Club meeting, he completed a “fill in the blank” worksheet of how cancer was affecting him and our family. Properly titled “F Cancer,'' he couldn’t resist the chance to describe that “Cancer is worse than watching Sam Bradford quarterback for the Eagles.” Yet, he still captured the pain of a cancer diagnosis, writing “I feel helpless, robbed, but living life better than many others without this disease.” I often return to this paper, hanging on the wall of our home, for a reminder to always search for positivity and appreciation for life, despite challenges. Cancer hardened me at a young age, but gave me the gift of perspective and resilience to anything I encounter in life.

Science not only offered me the tools to understand my father’s disease and prognosis, but an opportunity to try to understand the surrounding world. I admired the physicians, so committed to helping my young father live longer by consistently adapting therapies and pursuing new clinical trials when existing treatments failed. A commitment that allowed us to cherish more time spent in our ‘69 Camaro, driving with a focus only on the road ahead of us. Having the unique knowledge and ability to heal as a physician became my life goal. In my journey towards medical school, I used the experiences and perspectives I have from my father’s cancer, to drive my interests in science and humanity.

During my father’s treatment I gained a community through Gilda’s Club. Before Gilda’s, I felt so entirely alone in my experiences. Yet once a week, I entered the red doors of Gilda’s and walked into a space where I felt supported, loved, and understood. Having opportunities to share what was happening in my life, my fears of cancer and grief, or just the chance to sit quietly and listen to others filled those lonely spaces that are created by cancer.

Knowing how uniquely beautiful the Gilda’s community supported my family through my father’s cancer diagnosis and subsequent passing, giving back to these spaces became incredibly important to me. Through Gilda’s, I was recommended to Kesem, a nonprofit organization that provides support to children experiencing a parent’s cancer.

I served as the University of Pittsburgh’s Director, a role that connects me to a community with a similar connection to a life-changing diagnosis while aware of the differences experienced by each. A week of free summer camp is full of days spent tie-dying t-shirts, getting messy playing mud kickball, and sharing a smore that provides comfort and familiarity of childhood moments. Feelings and experiences that are often stripped away by a parent’s cancer. At camp, there is a ceremony in which campers and counselors are able to share. Watching children verbalize the confusion of seeing a parent’s feeding tube for the first time or the fear in watching a parent slowly deteriorate evokes tremendous emotions. Yet, the empathy and understanding gained in this empowering ceremony connects this community through shared, yet varied experiences. In a time of distress, a future of unknowns, and grief, these small carefree actions contain the great ability of community support. During my father’s treatment, I was privileged to be connected to the larger cancer community, which made my father’s diagnosis less terrifying.

As a future physician, I strive to support all communities impacted by disease. I want to be able to listen to patients and their families and provide a similar sense of empathy and support during treatment that my family received. That of which is similar to the moments of a weekly conversation circle at Gilda’s or the joy in connections. Moments that matter. A cancer diagnosis first exposed me to the importance of community and started the beginning of my journey to become a physician. I am honored to have an opportunity to attend medical school and grow into a position like my father’s physicians, able to provide comfort, understanding, and treatments to patients. Cancer has stimulated an appreciation of the abilities of medicine while understanding the need for human connections. Seeing small moments and gestures that matter in the course of a patient's treatment and lifetime builds community. Communities I wish to nurture. These are simply my driving forces.