

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

**2nd Place Winner**

**Marisa Nero**

**Turning The Page**

I sat there, staring. The bright white wall stared back at me. The smell of rubbing alcohol and the feeling of sickness consumed my body. As the doctors pricked my finger, the blood started to gush like a flowing stream. Something was wrong, very wrong. May 13, 2016, the day my life flipped upside down.

 The doctors told my mom: “You need to go to CHOP now!” As we rushed out of the doctor’s office, my mom began to panic. Her mind was racing, and she didn’t know what to do. She frantically called my aunt and dad to inform them that this was a much bigger deal than we initially thought. “Mommy, you’re scaring me!” I yelled. She quickly wiped her tears and told me everything would be ok; we just had to go see the big doctors at the hospital. I wanted no part in this. I whined and I cried not knowing how much worse it was going to get. Hearts pounding, hands trembling, we finally arrived at the hospital. I was fortunate enough to get taken back as soon as we got there. The doctors and nurses frantically came in. I watched them with wide eyes as they hooked me up to a tall, beeping machine covered in blue and red lights, and prepared to inject with me with needles as sharp as nails. After running a series of tests, the doctors finally knew exactly what was wrong with me. Erica, the warm-hearted child life specialist, took me to the playroom while the doctors talked to my parents. The doctors approached my parents and hit them with the words no parent wants to hear, “Your daughter has cancer.” As a kid I had no idea what this meant, but I understood that my body was sick and in order for it to get better I would need surgery. This surgery was to get special medicine in my body. I also understood that I would lose my hair and that made me nervous. The thought of losing my hair made me insecure. I was scared I would get made fun of or pointed out in school. My family’s and my life had just changed in the blink of an eye. My parents watched my life go from playful days outside to painful nights in the hospital. I had to get instant port surgery the next day. As they started to put the breathing mask over my mouth, my heart started to beat out of my chest. It felt like I was dying and then coming back to life. I started immediate treatment that day, constantly hooked up to IV’s. My body was weak, so weak I didn’t even want to get out of bed. I had multiple life specialists coming into my room to bring me crafts and fun toys. *Maybe this wasn’t so bad* I thought. I was lucky enough to have multiple visits from my family, friends, and teachers. But my favorite visit of all was my sister. My sister is my best friend, and I am so grateful to have had her by my side all these years. I was even lucky enough to get out of the hospital on her birthday!

With so many visits, brought so many thoughtful gifts. One gift was especially meaningful to me; this gift was a set of Crayola window crayons. One day my mom and I used the colorful window crayons to draw on my hospital window. She wrote the words “#MightyMarisa.” This term became a part of me. Everywhere I went in my hometown I saw the words #MightyMarisa printed. Seeing this made my family and I both know we weren’t alone in this journey and our whole community was by our side. It was a couple days after I arrived home from the hospital, and I was going on a walk with my mom. I suddenly pained my mom with the question “Am I going to die?” Shocked, my mom told me “Of course not.” Of course she was right, but little did I know that my body was close to collapsing. Cancer was now a part of me. It consumed my life from the ages of 7-9. I spent many of my days at the hospital. My hospital visits consisted of numerous lumbar punctures, port access for chemotherapy, long chemotherapy days, blood transfusions and more.

It was hard growing up being known as the girl who had cancer, but without cancer I wouldn’t be the strong person I am today. Cancer has also taught me many life lessons. Number one – you are not promised tomorrow, so be grateful for what you have. I was living my life like any other normal 7-year-old when my life was almost taken from me in the blink of an eye. Humans take advantage of the beautiful life around us thinking we are always guaranteed tomorrow, but that is false. You never know what tomorrow will bring. Another life lesson cancer has given me is kindness. I believe everyone should let their loving kindness show and make a difference in someone else life, because you never know what they are going through.

Looking back, the one thing that is the most important to me is that I didn’t let cancer define me. Cancer is only a chapter of my life. I look forward to where my life story will continue to take me.