A close-up of a sign

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

**Maryn Anderson**

**Her Rock**

Before my mom was diagnosed with cancer, the disease always seemed like such a far-removed aspect of life. Of course, I’ve heard of family members fighting cancer or a kid battling in school, but never so personal. I will never forget the day my mom told me the doctors found a mass in her breasts. Some may think that, as her youngest daughter, I bawled my eyes out or needed some time off from school, but no, not me. I am not sure if I was in shock or if it did not seem real, but I just went into my room and sat in the dark. If only I could go back and warn the younger me of what was to come. The biggest thing cancer taught me was to be independent. Before my mom was diagnosed, she was my personal driver, teacher, chef, and therapist. The change only began after my mom had her double mastectomy. For timeline purposes, my mom told me about her diagnosis at the end of my junior year of high school. She had surgery during the summer, and then I would begin my senior year while she was in treatment. In all of my then 16 years, I never saw my mom recovering from any major operation or without breasts, might I add. But through all of this, I never let my mom see a tear drop from my eyes. By the end of the summer, my senior pictures came, and I was under the impression that my mom was coming along. However, I was wrong, and then the waterworks started. She reassured me that I could go without her and enjoy myself, but only God knows how badly I wanted her to be there. The whole chemotherapy journey was my heart and my mind fighting because I knew sometimes my mom would not be feeling good enough to do anything, but as her baby, I just wanted my mom. Nonetheless, I took my senior pictures and also faced the fact that my mom had to focus on her healing so that she could be there to see me go to prom, graduate, etc. Cancer gave me no choice but to grow up. I drove myself to school every day, continued to be a cheerleader, got my passport, maintained a job, and cooked occasionally. I can look back and laugh now about how my cousins and I would often go to three fast food places to satisfy my mom’s cravings as well as our own. I will say cancer had a positive impact on my sense of community and family. My sister is in the Navy, and Covid-19, plus the recent cancer diagnosis, allowed her to be home for a long time. After about 7 years, this was much needed; I was only 16 and getting ready to apply for college, so I needed help in taking care of my mom. I did not worry anyone with my life because I knew or quickly learned how to care for myself. The only new obstacle was the everlasting effects that cancer places on the lives of survivors. I remember my sister and I would replace the drains after surgery, and because of the neuropathy, I would open all of my mom’s new medication. Family would visit, and we would all laugh and remain in good spirits. All in all, this experience with cancer was an interesting one, to say the least. Cancer taught me that time waits for no one, and I refused to let cancer take over our lives. I was aware of the effects, but I would not let my mom succumb to any depression or anxiety over it. When her hair started to grow back, I would beg her to let me do finger waves although she hated the style. If my friends and I were going out, we would show my mom our outfits and give her all of the gossip. I would bring her a meal home if I tried a new restaurant. If I took a mirror picture, she would be in it, too, like before. I made it my responsibility to keep life as normal as possible. After it all, I can look back and see how much I’ve grown as a student, daughter, sister, and friend because of how I handled adversity in my life.