A close-up of a sign

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

**1st Place Winner**

**Maura Quigley**

**Challenges Prove You Strong**

Strong has many definitions, but I think of it as how you adapt to life and its challenges. When I was five years old, my dad was diagnosed with stage 3 melanoma. My siblings and I were sitting down in our living room when my parents broke the news to us in August. I didn’t know what it meant, but it wasn't good by the look on their faces.

My dad was just a normal person that got diagnosed. I had no clue what it meant, but over the next year, I slowly got an understanding. Sometimes I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be home based on how the day's treatment went because that could affect the mood in the house. Due to this, I tried to be cautious as I knew it could have a domino effect. If my dad had a tough day, he sometimes would get frustrated with me, which would cause me to get upset. My mom always reminded me it was the chemo, but that only caused me to get more enraged. I thought of it as just another reason why cancer totally sucks. Sometimes when I got extremely upset, I would just go to my room and cry and think how much cancer ruined my entire life.

While times were difficult, we also had plenty of lasting memories together as a family. Whenever we did something that was super fun, it was like my own mini miracle. One time we were at a mini golf place and he started goofing around by singing and dancing. Memories like this provided me a time of peace and a glimmer of hope, and allowed me to feel like I was a normal kid with a normal life, just like I wanted.

After finishing fourth grade, I was excited to have the best summer of my life. We were at the beach for a long weekend that summer when I realized that things might not be so great. My dad barely left the hotel room and was lying in bed most of the time. I tried to block all of it out as I wanted to have fun, but later that week, my parents broke the news to me. My dad was going to pass soon. I didn’t know what to say except I was heartbroken. Over the next two weeks, I was a worried wreck always thinking maybe today will be his last day. It wasn't until two days before he had passed that I truly realized how bad it was going to be. He could barely walk and his skin was extra pale. That same day, he had given me a locket with his picture and an engravement saying, “I love you always”. I loved it because I could always have it, but it was also a reminder he was going to die.

After a five-year battle with cancer, my dad died on July, 6, 2022. That day was heartbreaking. I had always just thought, “My dad could just be one of those miracles that ended up beating cancer.” It wasn’t the case. The rest of the day, I just cried, lied in bed and looked at his pictures. Most of that week was a blur, with my emotions and brain overloaded. The funeral came and went. When I saw my dad in the casket, I was so sad as he just didn’t look the same. It wasn’t the dad that I knew and loved. Also, it was the last time I would ever see his face without a screen.

The following weeks were extremely hard. I wanted to put a happy face on for my family and didn't want to make my younger siblings even more sad. When I couldn’t bottle up my feelings anymore, I would go to my room and just cry and think. I would think of life without cancer where my family and I would enjoy days at the pool. Instead, I was in my room wishing to never come back out.

  Now nearly two years later, I am able to come to terms with my loss. I know I will never understand why the universe chose my family for this, but I am now able to finally live again like my dad always wanted. While you have to go through many challenges in life, each of them makes you stronger and allows to realize that you can overcome anything.