A close-up of a sign

Description automatically generated

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

**3rd Place Winner**

**Samantha Schwartz**

**Finding My Purpose Through Cancer**

My dad was diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer when I was about 13 and my sister was about 8 years old. He was only in the hospital to get a blood clot in his knee treated. After his doctor heard he was a smoker, he insisted on a lung scan. If this doctor had not taken initiative and made my dad get a scan, his cancer would have grown to stage 4 and killed him. With the help of genetic testing and amazing doctors, my dad’s cancer tested ALK positive after his first chemotherapy treatment. His treatment became just taking an ALK blocker for nine months, since this shrunk his cancer significantly. After these nine months, there was no change in the size of his cancer, so he began chemotherapy and radiation as well. After receiving months of chemotherapy and 30 radiation treatments, he was able to stop, stay on the ALK blocker, and enter remission. About three years into his remission, he began to have episodes where he was unable to speak or read. My mom is a nurse, and insisted he get a brain scan, which saved his life. His lung cancer had spread to his brain, but thankfully his brain metastases had the same ALK mutation. He still needed ten brain radiation treatments but was then put on an ALK blocker that crosses the blood brain barrier and has been in remission since.

The timing of my dad’s cancer was when I had to start thinking about college and what I wanted to pursue for a career. Since I was a kid, I would watch genetic disease videos, and was always so interested in genetics in school. Hearing about how one mutation was able to drastically change my dad’s cancer treatment sparked my interest in genetic counseling. After researching more about the career, I realized this is what I want to do in life. I hope to be able to help people in the same way my dad’s doctors helped my family. Bringing another family hope in the darkest times of their lives is so important, and genetic counseling does that. I shadowed a

genetic counselor last summer and saw what an impact the field makes on people. When one person in a family gets cancer with a high genetic contribution, such as breast, colon, and ovarian, they can refer the rest of their family to a genetic counselor. The genetic counselor can then refer them to the proper genetic testing and help them through the process of finding proper treatment. I am devastated my dad ever had to experience cancer, but I am very glad I learned what I want to pursue in life. Cancer helped me find my future career so I can help people who are going through what my dad went through.

Before my dad had cancer, we used to fight consistently over things that felt important in the moment. After nearly losing my dad, it has drastically improved our relationship. I have learned to stop caring about little things, because nothing is as critical as cancer. This experience has shown us both that nothing is that important to fight over constantly. It has made me re-evaluate how I treat other people, since we do not know which day will be our last. I try to solve conflicts with loved ones as soon as possible, because every moment with the people I love is a treasure. My dad and I are the closest we have ever been now, and I always look forward to seeing him when I am able to visit home. Being at college can be difficult, since there is always a fear, he will leave remission and I will not be around, but I make time to visit home often. Even when things get too busy at school, I text and call him when I have free time. I love my dad very much, and I am so glad that I learned to not focus on petty arguments and to just appreciate him being alive.

I have always had a very secure support system, and my friend and her family were always so helpful to my family during my dad’s treatment. She was always there to talk and

check in on me, and she is still one of my closest friends now. My friend’s mom had previously had breast cancer and has been in remission for years now. Her family introduced my family and I to Gilda’s Club in Warminster and to Camp Kesem. The support for these organizations was instrumental in helping my family past this terrible time. Joining both organizations helped expand my community to people going through exactly what I was experiencing. My friend that introduced me to these organizations and I were already close, but we have become much closer over time because of this special connection. When I felt alone and like no one would understand what I was going through, she was always there to listen and understand exactly how I felt. Her, her sibling, and my sister all did Gilda’s Camp together. My sister was a camper, but the rest of us were counselors. Since I was new and so was my friend’s sibling, we became closer and were talking all the time. I was always so excited for camp so I could spend more time with them and keep getting to know them better. Not only did I become closer with people I already knew, I also was able to meet so many new counselors and campers and connect with them. I loved helping the kids have a great summer and get the much-needed distraction from the cancer in their family. The counselors were always so fun to be around and helped me find a distraction from the cancer in my family with people who were so like me. Every counselor had the same goal of helping the kids have an amazing time, and we all worked well together in making that happen. Gilda’s allowed me to help people going through what I went through and get to know even more people in my situation.

Camp Kesem helped me create more connections with people with that shared cancer connection. I was a camper for 3 years, and every year the counselors worked so diligently to

create the best experience for us. My first year, my unit was just my friend who introduced me to Gilda’s, and 1 other girl. Having such a small group made it easy to feel so connected to the other campers. I already had a close friend, but we both clicked with the new girl from the start. I found it very easy to get to know her, and even now the three of us still hang out. We spent full days this summer making a huge frog puzzle with our new friend’s sister as well. My second year at Kesem was when my unit expanded to include my new friend’s sister and 5 other campers. The 4 of us became even closer as camp went on and being able to get to know more new campers made everything so exciting. We left camp feeling really connected to each other. Cancer helped me find so many new people that started as friends but have become my family. This has shown me that opening up to people helps create such deeper connections and more meaningful memories. I have also learned how one shared experience can create such a bond between others. Going into both camps I attended, the only thing I knew I had in common with everyone was being affected by cancer. After the camps, I found that I have so much more similarities to these people that were once strangers. A shared interest or experience can help bridge a beautiful connection between anyone.

My dad having cancer was by far the scariest experience of my life. At the time, I thought nothing good could come out of something so terrible. As much as I wish my family never had to go through this, I am beyond grateful for all the positives to come out of this. I have found the career I want to pursue, and after shadowing a genetic counselor I know this would fulfill me. I learned to appreciate all the time with my loved ones that I have, and not let small things start fights. Going to both camps has helped me create new connections that have become my new

family. I am so appreciative of all the support and love that has come out of such an agonizing situation.