



2025 Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

Abigal Swenson

Let Me Know If You Need Anything

3rd Place

“Let me know if you need anything,” is something I say at least twenty times a shift. I work as a waitress in a retirement community. So, between grabbing walkers and decaf coffees, asking if I can do anything else to help is something I do a lot. However, when I reflect on cancer and the effect it has on my life, the phrase definitely holds relevance in my family life, my personality, and my view on community.

My younger sister, Maddie was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL) for the first time in 2015. At the time of her initial diagnosis, I was nine years old. Maddie is the middle child, born between me and our youngest sister. Maddie was seven years old at diagnosis and our youngest sister, Isabelle, was four. As the oldest, I knew I had a role to play in our family. And so I started asking, “Let me know if you need anything?” for the first time and definitely not the last. I remember being nine and feeling all I wanted to do was take care of my sisters. Whether my youngest sister hurt her knee playing soccer or my middle sister collapsed on the ground due to severe pain, I was ready to go with an ice pack in hand. And always asking, “Let me know if you need anything?” I love my sisters. They are the people closest to me and the bond I have with them is something I value the most in the whole world. We were always a tight-knit group however, when Maddie was diagnosed our relationship deepened. Our Dad always says to us “Sisters stick together” and as my sister’s treatment proceeded we did just that. Isabelle and I wrote letters to Maddie when she was in the hospital. We played in our backyard together, always being careful of the port in Maddie’s chest. We stood up for each other if someone was bothering one of us, especially if someone was making fun of my sister for being bald. Everything we did we did together. Whether it was cancer or jump rope we stuck together. Through cancer, I’ve learned a lot about family. I have learned how to be there for someone. I have learned how to love someone through difficult times. And most importantly, I have learned the responsibility and fulfillment that comes with being the oldest sister.



My sister was considered cancer-free at the age of ten. My family and I were so happy. We celebrated with a lavish party with all our loved ones invited. We even rented a DJ to dance the night away. No one expected that in just a few years, my sister would be diagnosed a second time. She was 13 years old, and I was 14 when she relapsed. The day she relapsed was very strange. I had no idea what Maddie was going through, and no clue cancer was even on the table again. But that day in school I began to cry for no reason at all. I cried all day. I cried in class, I cried at lunch, and I even cried on the bus ride home from school. Somehow, I knew the moment I came home that my sister had cancer again. And I knew that it was time to be a big sister again. I know this isn't everyone's cup of tea but, I am convinced that an angel whispered in my ear that day. Telling me ahead of time so that I could be strong for my sisters. I did not cry when I heard Maddie had cancer again, I did nothing but give my sister a big hug. My faith grew ten times that day. And I am forever grateful to the angel who granted me the opportunity to be who my sisters needed me to be. Even after my sister got cancer a second time I was praying and asking the Lord, "Why again?", "Why now?". Thankfully, I was able to see the blessings and silver linings that often come with life's struggles. The global pandemic of , COVID-19 shut down schools and offered my family time to focus on each other ,and drastically decreased our exposure to germs. I believe that the isolation we experienced protected my sister as she was extremely immune-compromised and even common infections would have put her in danger. I am extremely grateful for my sister's health as well as my faith. The experience has made me a stronger person. My faith has made me patient, balanced, at peace, and kind. And it always has me saying, "Let me know if you need anything." Without the influence of cancer, my faith would not be where it is today. And in direct correlation to that, I would be a much different person.

Cancer not only deepened the bond I have with my sisters, and my faith but it also changed my view of community. As my sister's treatment continued we proceeded to participate in local cancer support communities. The kindness we were shown in these places is something I'll never forget, and something I try to pass forward. We were given support in school (most notably by the CSCGP), enjoyed a Make-A-Wish trip to Disney, gifted a box of toys from a local school, and received more handmade cards than you can imagine. The goodwill my family received has given me an optimistic view of the world. The love my family and I received filled my heart with gratitude and ignited a passion to pay it forward.

In elementary school, I started carrying Band-Aids and lollipops just in case someone got hurt on the playground. And even today, I try to keep some kind of candy in my backpack just in case I run into anyone having a rough day. But these small things don't hold a candle to the kindness my family and I have received throughout the years, especially at the CSCGP. I can't imagine a world where I didn't grow up looking forward to their yearly holiday party, summer camp, Easter egg hunts, cooking and crafts. Most recently CSCGP, exposed me to the wonderful world of spray tans by the sweetest donor. I am grateful and blessed to have grown up around such kindness.



In the past, I've volunteered in different local organizations such as THON, Kisses for Kyle, the CSCGP, and the CHOP Parkway Run and Walk. I volunteered as a young adult student leader at Ronald McDonald camp over the summer. And next year I plan on becoming a camp counselor to help out even more. But most notably, for the past six summers I've had the opportunity to work with children between the ages of five to twelve years old at the Cancer Support Community of Greater Philadelphia summer camp. I love working with the kids and creating an environment where they can forget about cancer. I was able to be creative and help with crafts and develop games and theme activities for the campers. In my role as a camp counselor, I learned many life skills. I was able to develop clear communication skills, patience, gratitude, creativity, as well as enhancing my problem-solving skills. In my community, I have learned how kind strangers can be. I have seen the full effect of compassion and how it can change a child's life. In addition, I have learned that even small gestures, like offering someone a Jolly Rancher can put a smile on their face. I will carry these lessons with me through life. They affect my interactions, my actions, and my thoughts.

I hope to carry what I've learned from cancer into my future career as an elementary school art teacher. I know it will be an extremely rewarding and satisfying career. As an elementary school art teacher, I will be able to get in touch with my community. I look forward to giving children the opportunity to be creative, as well as give them the outlet to express themselves. At Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) the Childlife Specialists would give me all the paper, glue, and scissors I wanted to create crazy pieces of art. This outlet made trips to the hospital more enjoyable and easier to tolerate. The idea that I could give that feeling to another child is inspiring. I look forward to putting out the same positive energy into the community that the community has given to me over the years.

I have learned a great deal from cancer. I have learned what being there in sickness and in health means. I have learned what it means to "stick together". I have grown in my faith, my courage, and my ability to lead. Cancer taught me gratitude. It taught me to be thankful for my personal health and to be grateful for the health of my family. Cancer has shown me sickness and extreme loss. Without it, I would not be who I am today. I will always be grateful that my sister's cancer journey ended in good health. This grace has left me full of gratitude. Causing me to ask my sisters, my community, and God, "Let me know if you need anything".