

2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
High School Essay Contest

# Bella Sulzbach

## *Ethereal Beauty*

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I mean, I knew she was sick, everyone did, but I never imagined I would never see her again in this lifetime. And Leila was, well, different. We were all excited about makeup and tiktok and boys that one of us liked, but she still loved Disney movies and spending time with her family more than anything. I honestly never bothered to even google what she had – something called anaplastic astrocytoma. It sounded too scientific and technical. Life was busy, sports and school dances and sleepovers, and I always meant to spend time with Leila but was kind of afraid to. I never realized what a regret that would be in my life, and how profound of an impact her resonant beauty, innate kindness and bright spirit would have on me.

At first, it didn't really seem like what Leila had was that big of a deal. She missed school sometimes but she still played volleyball and golfed and had friends that she hung out with and everything. She just exuded joy all the time, how could she be sick? Her smile was stunning, everyone thought so. Every day she was positive and sunny and I was confused because why was I going through all of this drama becoming a teenager with no health problems and Leila was happy but had cancer? I think it was her spirit that made me pay attention to her, not the fact that she was sick. She was the type of person that everyone noticed because she was always smiling and somehow with her it was contagious. I remember thinking about this, and wondering if it was because her family was also so happy and tight-knit. No matter what happened to them, they were always an aligned force, strong and resilient and proud and supporting each other.

I finally realized what it was that enabled Leila and her family to stay so strong in the face of everything that they confronted. They all believed deeply in God, they knew that there was a plan for each of them and they had faith in that plan 1000%. I thought about this a lot, I realized that the strength of their beliefs gave them comfort and peace, even though they were facing unimaginable pain on an ongoing basis. I admired Leila, and her entire family, and I prayed for them often.

Over time, Leila became more and more sick. The school held events in her honor and there were walks and other fund-raising events. I learned that she had Li-Fraumeni syndrome,

which is a genetic disorder that means that you have a higher risk of getting several types of cancer. Apparently, it often afflicts children and young adults which seemed particularly cruel. Leila lost her hair, and was less talkative, and began missing school a lot more. I started to worry about her but was too afraid to say anything to her directly. My mom kept telling me to call her or offer to visit her but I felt awkward and didn't want it to seem like I was just reaching out because she had cancer. Luckily, Leila's mom arranged a big get-together for her and all of us at school to spend time with her at a movie. She moved slower, she talked less. She was still Leila though, she smiled and hugged people and made everyone happy even though some people were trying to hide the fact that they were crying. This was right before Christmas break so everyone went home to their families after that and we didn't see Leila anymore.

A few weeks after Christmas, my mom told me that Leila had passed away. I sat there, shocked, wordless, tears streaming down my face silently. How was it possible? How cruel was this world? How could someone so kind, so good, someone with such ethereal beauty in every way, be taken from everyone? I thought about Leila so much after that, I am ashamed to say, much more than I ever had before. I reflected on what an impact she was having on my life, what an impact she had on everyone's life that she came across. She was the embodiment of sunshine and selflessness, she supported her family and her friends all of the time even though she was suffering herself. She remains the truest example I know of what it really means to 'be a good person,' to be selfless, to live a daily life of thinking of others before yourself.