

2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

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Everyone Loves An Underdog Story

When you hear about cancer, you often think, "That won't happen to my family." That's what I thought—until it did. When you think of great underdog stories, you might envision Rocky beating Apollo Creed or your college basketball team triumphing over the defending champions in March Madness. For me, the ultimate underdog is my mother.

Before my mom's diagnosis, my experience with cancer was always close enough that I was aware of it but distant enough that I wasn't directly affected. I had heard stories about how much of a light my great-grandmother was and how my aunt embraced life with her spunky attitude. However, I was just a baby during those losses, so I never witnessed the struggles they faced. As a pastor's kid, I spent my life sending prayers to families dealing with illnesses, only hearing their stories—until, amid COVID-19, just as I was about to join my sixth-grade Zoom class, my mom gathered my sisters and me into the kitchen and said, "I found a lump, and it has been proven to be breast cancer." These were words I never thought I would hear from my mother. At eleven years old, I couldn't comprehend how my perfectly healthy mom could be diagnosed with a disease that had only claimed the lives of loved ones I never had the chance to meet. At that moment, I realized that my mom was the underdog in this battle.



The four of us sat at the table, crying, while my mom reassured us that everything would be okay. Later that day, she and my dad told our brother the news, and our tears were contagious as he returned from school. As a family, our lives seemed to freeze. The glue that held us together was unraveling before our eyes. Yet, even though my mom was sick, she wanted us to continue with our studies and sports, believing that it would bring her the most joy. But that was difficult—especially when we were all stuck at home together, watching her grow sicker each day.

As the youngest child, my role became to help in any way I could—baking for the family, watching movies with my mom, and bringing laughter into our home. The only word I could use to describe my mom having cancer is "weird." It felt unsettling to have people send food to our house and even stranger to hear, "How is your mom doing?" I would always respond with "Better," even when I knew that wasn't true. We were used to supporting others, but being on the receiving end felt foreign. However, that strangeness turned into appreciation. By taking these actions, our friends and family made life easier, showing up for us the way my mom had done for them countless times. My grandparents were a significant part of this support. They visited daily, checked on my mom, took me to practice, and brought us food.

I call this an underdog story—someone fighting back against a force that no one thought she could defeat. My mom beat cancer. She turned her experience into children's books for kids like me, whose parents might be going through the same thing. She was able to transform our pain into something positive.

I struggled to understand how my mom could talk about such a terrible experience and be



open about its effects on those around her. I just didn't get it. I witnessed how my mom had to relearn how to walk and perform everyday activities, and I saw how the illness took strength from her body. I saw the tears and heard the conversations. Because of my mom's resilience, I have never been prouder. My mom was among the fortunate few who defeated this beast many couldn't overcome. She took something that could have changed her life's trajectory and turned it into a learning experience for others. My mom went back to school and is currently pursuing her doctorate. She even established a nonprofit called Pink Lemonade, inspired by her cancer journey. It is amazing how she made lemonade from the lemons she was given.

This journey changed me, too. I learned that strength isn't just about physical endurance—it's also about perseverance, faith, and the ability to turn adversity into purpose. I saw firsthand what it means to fight, not just for survival but for a better future. My mom's story is an underdog story, but it has also inspired me. If she could face cancer with such courage and poise, I know that I have no excuse to do the same with whatever challenges life throws my way.