



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
High School Essay Contest

# Carly Ackerman

## *The Sunnyside of the Street*

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place

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As I sat in an uncomfortable hospital chair, my dad's arms tightly embraced me as I gasped for a breath of air while uncontrollably sobbing. My mom saw me in utter despair and the words, "I love you baby" whispered out of her mouth. Little did I know, these would be the last four words my mom would ever say to me; I will hold them close to me for the rest of my life.

My mom, Valerie Ackerman, was diagnosed with stage four kidney cancer at the young age of 43 in 2020 - I was just 11 years old. Just four short years later, this past November, she lost her heroic battle. My mom was my best friend. We were inseparable from the day I was born. There is no bond that has, or ever will, compare to the one we shared. Somehow, she still managed to be my rock, my number one supporter, and overall the most amazing mother. And all while she was going through Hell and back. This is just a tiny glimpse of how selfless she really was.

The months following her death have been the most difficult days of my life. I'm homesick for someone I will never get back. Her absence is felt more and more each day as I navigate my young adulthood. I would do absolutely anything to get the chance to gossip with

her one more time. To chat about stupid high school drama or snuggle up on the couch while watching our favorite movie.

As I grow, it is important to keep her legacy alive within me. Initially, when she died, I was very distraught over the fact that she was taken too soon. I worried that I was not able to get enough advice from her; but in reality I did. Although she will not be here for every inconvenience or setback, she did teach me the most invaluable lessons. Whether it was bad news about her cancer scans, or my perpetual fear of losing her, my mom was always a positive ray of sunshine. She would always tell me, "It will always feel just a little bit better in the morning." I've been telling myself these exact words every day since she passed. Whether the challenge is extreme, like lying awake lonely at night missing her presence, or as little as getting a bad grade on a test, I still feel her words of wisdom. These words always get me through the difficult days. I am fortunate enough to get a tomorrow unlike my mom.

My mom had the most beautiful soul. I never heard her complain or dwell throughout the entirety of her cancer journey. She was the most optimistic person. She would always say, "I choose to live on the sunny side of the street," even when she was going through the darkest times of her life. As you can imagine, it came as no surprise to our family when she said she "wasn't scared to pass and was looking forward to going to be with God". My mom was a strong force. She took cancer head-on fighting it with her horns, just like a bull. My mom was really never sick a day in her life before she got diagnosed with cancer. She used to say she never got sick because she was "Strong Like Bull". She, and our entire extended family and friends, eventually raised money for Kidney Cancer Awareness and got t-shirts made with the brand "Strong Like Bull". When I think about this slogan an analogy comes to my mind: A bull represents underlying strength and untamed power in a variety of cultures and religions. That

was exactly my mom. She fought like no other. Never looking back or being angry or resentful. Never taking a break until it was time to hang up her horns and exchange them for a pair of enchanting angel wings.

It is hard to express how much of an amazing woman my mom truly was. However, if you got to know her you were considered blessed. The gaping hole that she left in the world will always be felt. I can't express how grateful and rich in life I am to have had the blessing to call her my mother. My goal is to carry on the legacy that she left behind and I hope more than anything that whoever is reading this will take just some of the empowering lessons she taught me with her time here on Earth. Her unwavering strength, selflessness, and optimism was so inspiring. So from here on out, I choose to live on the sunny side of the street. That is what she would have done and I pray that others can too.