



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program
Middle School Essay Contest

Carolyn Austin

Finding Myself After Cancer

1st Place

I stared out of the hospital window, watching the world move without me. Before, my life had been filled with adventure — climbing the massive oak tree in my grandmother's front yard, racing through scavenger hunts with my brother every summer, spending entire afternoons exploring the creek near my house. I had freedom, spontaneity, and the simple joy of being a kid. But when I was diagnosed with leukemia during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of that vanished in an instant.

Cancer didn't just take my health — it took my world. Suddenly, I couldn't go outside, couldn't get hurt, couldn't even be near other people. The isolation was suffocating. School became a distant memory, and the social life I had once taken for granted dissolved. One constant was my brother, Jack. He was my lifeline, my companion during those years of loneliness. While kids my age formed friendships, had sleepovers, and made memories together, I sat alone in my room, fighting a battle I never asked for.

When treatment ended, I expected to return to life as it had been before. I imagined stepping back into school, slipping into friendships as easily as putting on an old sweater. But I had changed, and the world had moved on without me. Socializing felt foreign, like speaking a language I no longer understood. I struggled to make eye contact, to keep a conversation going without overthinking every word. The only friend who truly felt safe was my best friend, Lydia. She had been there when I needed her most. With her, I didn't have to pretend. I could just be.



But outside of that small comfort, the world was overwhelming. Being in public spaces made my skin prickle. The noise, the movement, the sheer energy of people living their lives was too much. I felt claustrophobic, my brain buzzing as if trying to process a thousand sensations at once. Even though my body was healing, my mind felt trapped, unable to adjust to the life I was supposed to return to. Cancer had not only taken away my past but had rewritten my future. The person I had been — the fearless, energetic risk-taker — no longer existed. And that realization was heartbreaking.

In the wreckage of who I once was, I found something new. I learned to slow down, to appreciate quiet moments. I discovered strengths I had never needed before — patience and an ability to adapt. Instead of mourning the loss of my old self, I began to embrace the person I was becoming.

I am not the same child who climbed trees without fear, but I am someone who understands the value of perseverance. I may not be the most outgoing person in the room, but I know the power of deep, meaningful connections. I may never regain the reckless energy I once had, but I have a newfound appreciation for life and the people who stood by me through my darkest days.

Cancer took so much from me, but it also forced me to grow in ways I never expected. I am still figuring out who I am in this new reality, still learning to navigate a world that feels both familiar and foreign. But I am here. I survived. And in that survival, I have found a different kind of freedom — the freedom to redefine myself, on my own terms.