

## 2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

# Daniel Nelson

### *Mortality Shaping My Identity*

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Being born a girl, attending a very conservative Catholic school, but having very short hair that was slowly growing back after my chemotherapy, put a target on my back for the relentless bullying from other girls in my grade. When I was six, I was diagnosed with Burkitt's Lymphoma after expecting a diagnosis of tonsillitis. I was only in first grade, and I worried, wondering if I'd make it to second. My anxiety continued to spiral as my bare-minimum religious family started praying more, my face made it into the newspaper, and I stopped going to school. After my treatments ended and I entered remission, my journey with cancer was far from done. I reexperienced my trauma watching multiple family members get diagnosed with cancer, with some losing the battle. Because of this agonizing cycle, I developed severe general anxiety disorder, starting to attend therapy at as young as eight years old. Seeing my loved ones struggle, having severe anxiety as a child, and being ostracized forced me to mature faster than other kids my age, finding myself and my beliefs early on in life, which changed who I was as a person and shaped my identity today.

My familial medical history runs deep; I have had ten family members with cancer in the last four generations, and five of them died because of it. Of the ten, one diagnosis hit me especially hard: my cousin, Elisa. Elisa was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was very young, but after going through treatment, she was cancer-free and went into remission. When I was older, a few years after my treatments ended, she was re-diagnosed with breast cancer, but the prognosis this time was much worse: stage four. The cancer had spread throughout her entire body. Her funeral was the first funeral I ever attended, and I haven't attended any since. The

viewing hit me harder than the service; I saw her, but it wasn't my cousin. She was pale— almost pure white. All her life had been drained from her body. I didn't cry at the viewing, nor did I cry during the service. When it was time to leave, though, I broke down. I curled up on the floor between the pews, and I cried. My dad had to pick me up and carry me out. I have no memory of anything that happened during the mass; I was in my own world as my brain was screaming with questions.

I grew up religious: all my schooling until high school was at a private Catholic school. Up until my cancer treatments, I never questioned what I was taught. My diagnosis actualized the idea of mortality and the afterlife, and at the young age of six, I started questioning my religion. My theological apprehension reached its height during Elisa's funeral service; being face-to-face with death for the first time had my brain bubbling with questions and doubting the only beliefs I'd ever known. How does God choose who lives and who dies? Why would God end someone's life so early when they have so much left to do? If God has a plan for everyone, what did my family and I do to deserve this path? From then on, my Catholicism dwindled, and still now, as a teenager, I don't know what I believe. The effects of cancer on my family destroyed my ability to believe in a god who's supposed to be all-good. I had decided I did not believe in God, but I could not tell my parents how I felt; I was destined to finish out my Catholic schooling: praying as a school several times a day, daily theology class, and using first period to attend mass multiple times a month, but without finding the answers I need.

My relatives' diagnoses changed my beliefs and introduced me to the idea of mortality, but I was also heavily affected by my diagnosis, as it brought forth bullying and exclusion. My inpatient chemotherapy treatment only lasted three months; I had surgery to take my port out on New Year's Eve. I was excited to go back to school after Christmas break and restart. My eagerness quickly died: going back to school was harder than I thought it would be. Being at school meant being away from my parents all day, and after always having at least one of them by my side for three months, I had developed severe separation anxiety. In addition to that, being out of school meant I came back to a lot of lingering rumors. I had a friend or two, but the majority of the class wouldn't sit with me because they thought my cancer was contagious. Almost every single day before lunchtime, I'd be in the nurse's office with a strong aching and twisting knot of anxiety in my stomach waiting to be picked up. I made it through very few full

days of school that year, and the other kids noticed very early on. I was constantly teased, whether it was for my constant absence from school, the interests I developed during my treatments, or my short patchy hair.

Though it put a huge target on my back, I liked my short hair. Losing my hair because of chemotherapy made me realize that hair is just hair; beyond that, I felt confident in trying new things and experimenting. As I got older, I never let my hair grow back to its original waist-length, and I didn't mind being teased about it by the girls at school because I was welcomed by the boys. Every day, we played football during recess, and after school we'd play video games; I didn't fit in with the other girls, and yet I was the happiest I had ever been. Sometimes I'd forget I was supposed to be a girl. When I did programs at my local youth center, camps over the summer, or played video games with people online, I would lie to the other kids telling them I was a boy. As soon as I heard of the term transgender, I knew that I was. When I was 12, I came out to my classmates. Though most of the kids were conservative Catholic and thought I was ridiculous, those I confided in kept my secret until I was ready to share more widely.

I'm positive that I would still identify as transgender even if I did not have cancer, but I am also positive that I would've never found myself so early on. Being faced with my mortality and being faced with the death of a loved one at such a young age, though it forever modified my beliefs, showed me that life's tragedies open portals to previously unknown insights. My experience with cancer is what makes me the adventurous person I am, and though I experienced suffering and loss, I wouldn't change my life if I could: I push the limits for the people I've lost who can't, I have found my identity and self-love for it, and I've learned to manage my anxiety. Cancer, chemotherapy, remission, and loss are central to the way I see myself and the empathy I have when seeing others.