



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
Middle School Essay Contest

# Grace Hedges

*Nature's Way*

## Honorable Mention

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611,720. It may just be a number to some people. I would never have guessed that my family would be affected by this number. 611,720 people died of cancer in 2024, and one of them I loved. Cancer will rob families of loved ones, hope and strength.

Big Jim. That is what my family and I called him. He was my Gram's first love and gave me my Aunt Melissa and Uncle Jimmy. My mom and my other two uncles, Ronnie and Christopher, have another father. Despite not being their biological father, he was still their dad. Big Jim was sweet, determined and cared for his family more than anything. It all happened too quickly. At the dinner that my parents told me that he had cancer, I froze. My heart stopped, yet it was beating at the same time. I went numb but tried to keep a calm expression. My body raced like a cheetah catching its prey. My head raced like a car on its track. My parents said that they did not know what was going to happen.

For the next weeks, my mom and her siblings went to care for Big Jim. Despite having a rare type of cancer, a genuine smile was plastered on his face. Watching their dad fade away was



hard for my aunt and uncle. My family recollected memories of him. Jim Hellings loved fishing and smoking a cigar. He had a legacy in both his family, and his work. When he was younger, he opened a landscaping company named Nature's Way Landscaping. His work, love, and dedication are showcased all around the city of Philadelphia. He showed his talent and good through making friend's gardens beautiful, tending to trees, and creating happiness in yards. Thanksgiving was Big Jim's favorite holiday. He would bring a delicious turkey and a comforting smile. He would always ask me, "So, any guys I have to give a little chat to?" It made me so happy to be around him.

Then, October 28<sup>th</sup> came. I got the news. He was gone, in heaven. The cancer had taken him. A faint echo of a bell rang in my head but got quieter. This time at dinner, I did not hold back my tears. As the tears went down my face, I realized that was it. No more funny jokes and good memories or stories. That night, I wept missing him, but I knew heaven was for him. My mother and her siblings went through his workplace for the next couple of weeks. Big Jim was the glue of the family, but that glue got too old and withered away.

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, we went to the funeral home. Hundreds of people were there, most of which I didn't know. I looked around at all the fun pictures of him. Then came the service. I sat next to my sisters and cousins. My mother and Uncle Ronnie gave a beautiful speech on how important and wonderful Big Jim was. I could feel the tears creeping up from my throat. One of his employees came up. I could see the heartbroken look on his face, and mine automatically copied his. He said, "There was one time I was with him, and we were talking to a customer together. When we were done, the customer said Big Jim and I seemed close. I responded by saying," he paused as he choked up, "He is my dad. The customer left and Jim said, 'Why would



you say that?’ I said, ‘Because you treat me as family’” Once those words flew out of his mouth, I knew. I knew that all the people there loved him as much as I did.

Cancer can take and take. People of any age can be affected. It is heartbreaking. But with death there is a celebration of life and of all the wonderful things someone has accomplished. You can’t help but reflect on their legacy. Big Jim’s work can be found all around Philly. It seems impossible to have Thanksgiving without him, but he is still with me, even if I didn’t realize it at first. A cancer patient’s actions, hopes, and dreams are their legacy. They are not gone; they are all around us.