

2025 Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

Hunter McElwain

Growing Up in a Pink World

2nd Place

I sat down to write this essay more times than I can count, only to keep coming up empty. My parents kept encouraging me to push through, but I didn't know what to say. There was a lot of fighting and anger over it. How could I answer questions about cancer's impact on my life when I barely remember it? My mom was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer when I was two years old. I don't remember the fear, the months of treatments, the surgeries, or the uncertainty. I only remember small details, like watching trains from the hospital window, walking to the train platform, and eating snacks in waiting rooms. To me, that was just normal life or a toddler. I didn't realize then how much cancer had shaped my childhood and, ultimately, who I am today.

Cancer is one of the worst illnesses a person can face, and sadly, millions of people go through it. Unfortunately, my mom was one of them. I later learned that my great-grandmother and aunt also had breast cancer. But at two years old, I wasn't aware of what a diagnosis meant or what cancer even was. I just knew my mom had lots of doctor's appointments, and I got to tag along. At the oncology center, nurses let me hang out at their desks while my mom had daily radiation treatments. I sat in the lobby with my grandma, amused by fish tanks and endless snacks. I didn't see anything unusual or think anything different. I was just spending time with my mom, who somehow always made things fun.

As I got older, I started noticing how much cancer was a part of our lives, in a positive way. We weren't just a family, we were a pink family, which my little sister loves since that is her favorite color. We walked in the Race for the Cure many times and always



had a team of my mom's friends and family, with matching shirts. I walked the runway in the In the Pink fashion show for the Princeton Breast Cancer Resource Center. I vaguely remember going to The College of New Jersey as my mom spoke to students on the campus and they released hundreds of pink balloons. Each balloon had a wish and a memory attached. We also participated in the Cancer Support Community glow-in-the-dark Easter egg hunt. I have outgrown it, but my little twin sisters look forward to it each year.

My favorite event was and still is the Young Survival Coalition Tour de Pink, a multi-day bike ride supporting young women with breast cancer. My dad rode close to 70 miles every year, and my mom and I stood on the sidelines at every rest stop, ringing cowbells and cheering him on. Sometimes, I hopped on my own bike and rode alongside him for as long as my short, little legs could handle. I didn't realize then that we weren't just supporting my dad, we were part of something much bigger. The riders weren't just strangers; they were survivors, caregivers, and loved ones. They were family for the day, bonded by a shared experience I was only beginning to understand.

When I was younger, I didn't question why we did all these fun, pink events. But now, at 18 years old, I see it clearly. My mom wasn't just a survivor, she was a part of the breast cancer community. She ran a monthly support group for young women for over a decade, helping others through the same battle she fought. When she received the YWCA Princeton Tribute to Women award for her dedication and volunteerism, I was just a kid in an uncomfortable suit, unaware of its significance. Now, I see that she deserved that glass award for the impact she made and continues to make for so many women.

Without realizing it, cancer shaped me in ways I never expected. It taught me the power of giving back. In the summer, I used to set up pink lemonade stands on my front lawn, raising money for others impacted by breast cancer. Neighbors and friends always showed up, donating generously. Back then, I didn't get the deeper meaning. I was just having fun selling pink lemonade. But looking back, I see that I was learning something important: kindness and community go hand in hand. I also now see the importance of philanthropy.

Cancer also brought unique experiences into my life. I starred in a commercial for the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, where my mom was treated. I still remember stepping off a bus and giving her a big hug as the lights and cameras rolled. It felt like a



movie star moment, but it was real; it was a celebration of the research that impacted many survivors. Another time, my mom and I got a private tour of the Eagles stadium. We met players, ran onto the field, and soaked in a moment that only happened because of the cancer community. It showed me that support stretches further than I ever imagined.

Last year, we threw a party celebrating my mom being cancer-free for 15 years. Looking around the room, I realized something: many of the people there are people who now support me, were friends my mom met through her battle, and all the stages of her life. The connections she made turned into lifelong friendships, proving that even the hardest experiences can create something positive.

The biggest lesson I've learned from all of this is that you never truly know what someone is going through. My mom looked fine on the outside, but she was fighting for her life. And still, she showed up for me. She took me to the park, rode bikes with me, made sure I never missed a playdate or fun activity, and she always smiled through the exhaustion. At some point, I realized how much effort she put into making it seem like she was perfectly fine. That has stuck with me. People might be struggling in ways we can't see, but they keep going.

I've also learned that family is everything. No matter what, my mom had and still has so much support. If she wasn't feeling well, my dad was there, or sometimes it was one of her friends. If they couldn't be, my grandparents stepped in. They drove us to appointments, watched me when my parents needed help, and still wear pink ribbons proudly. To this day, they still show up for every event, both for me, my sisters, and my mom. Their unwavering support taught me that with family by your side, you can get through anything.

Community has had just as big of an impact. The people who supported my mom were more than just friends, they were part of something bigger. And now, she gives that same support to others. We still attend events to help raise awareness, including a recent Rutgers University Women's basketball Play 4 Kay game to honor breast cancer survivors. I stood in the stands with my dad and sisters as a huge group of survivors, including my mom, ran onto the court and were honored. At every walk and every ride, hundreds of people show up. It's a reminder that no one fights alone.

Being the son of a cancer survivor has shaped how I approach life. My mom taught me to keep going, no matter what obstacles stand in the way. I carried that lesson into my own life, especially in high school, whether it was bike racing, basketball championships, or personal challenges, I always pushed forward. But somehow that escaped me as I fought about trying to write this essay. She also taught me that asking for help isn't a weakness. We all need support sometimes, and there's strength in knowing when to lean on others. Most importantly, I've learned that helping others, even when you don't know how it really matters. Everyone is facing something, seen or unseen. If I can be the person who encourages someone else to keep going or just knows they have a friend, then I'll know I'm living by the lessons my mom's journey taught me.

As I wrap up high school, I will miss all the Pink Out games at school. For most people, they were just a fun theme night at the stadium or courts to wear all the pink you had. But for me, my family, and everyone who stood by my mom, they meant so much more.

Writing this essay has been eye-opening to me. I started out thinking cancer had no real impact on my life, but now I see how much it shaped me. My mom's diagnosis was more than just a disease, it was an opportunity for me to grow. And as I step into college, I look forward to carrying these lessons forward, making my own impact along the way. And I guess my parents were right, I could write an essay about something that started when I was two.