

2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

John Pellechia

Pink Passion

I proudly added pink to my wardrobe to show support for my mother, who recently battled breast cancer, and for all those impacted by this horrible disease. I vividly recall the day my mom told me she was diagnosed. At first, I thought I was in trouble until she uttered the words, "I have breast cancer." Like everyone, the "C" word is something you are never prepared to hear. Her statement became an echo, repeating in my head. The numbness began to wear off as my eyes welled up, and I felt the cold stream of tears running down my cheeks. My anxiety kicked into overdrive, and with a lump in my throat, I finally found the strength to ask, "Are you going to die?" Although there were many unknowns, one thing was certain: our family was committed to fighting through this difficult time together, drawing strength from one another and communicating openly. As an only child, I understood the significance of my role and knew I needed to step up more than ever.

Being a young male, I had limited knowledge about breast cancer. I began educating myself by reading the materials given by her physician, which helped me feel more prepared to ask questions, engage in discussions, and support my mom during this journey.

Within six weeks of receiving the devastating news, my mom underwent a bilateral mastectomy, followed by emergency surgery and then reconstructive surgery—all within a three-month span. My natural instincts kicked in, and I found myself doing things I never imagined related to her physical care, such as managing her surgical drains (since my father is afraid of blood), shampooing her hair, and providing other necessary assistance. I quickly expanded my housekeeping duties, adding bathroom cleaning, vacuuming, and dishwashing to my list of personal accomplishments.

There was so much emphasis on physical healing and survival mode that it wasn't until months later that we were able to focus on emotional healing, both as a family and individually. This wasn't my first encounter with overcoming adversity. In first grade, I required an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for reading, speech, social skills, and physical/occupational support due to my learning disability. To build strength and



discipline, I joined Taekwondo, earning a second-degree black belt, and began playing basketball with the Catholic Youth Organization. My hard work and perseverance eventually led to the elimination of my IEP. I further challenged myself by exploring more academic opportunities, taking honors classes while consistently maintaining the honor roll. But this life event was especially difficult for me, and yet another test of time. This was my mom, my biggest cheerleader, who continuously encourages me through difficult times, providing her unconditional love.

However, what I learned from this journey has been monumental. It taught me the importance of not taking people or life for granted. The bond with my mother has deepened, and our appreciation as a family has grown. We now make sure to spend quality time together, whether it's sitting down at the table for dinner to talk about our day, playing board games, or going for walks in the neighborhood. We intentionally slow down the fast pace of life and savor all the little moments, making big memories. When disagreements arise with my mother, I remind myself how blessed I am to have her, and it helps change my perspective.

I've also learned the gift of gratitude, humanity, and empathy for everyone I meet. I recognize that every name and face carry a unique story. At some point, everyone encounters hardship, whether physical, mental, or financial. Being a pillar of my community and helping those in need has always been important to me. Over the past two years, I have volunteered with a local nonprofit to distribute pet supplies to fixed-income families, helping them keep their pets at home and out of shelters. My involvement and compassion for assisting others has grown. I enjoy doing simple acts of kindness, such as selecting gift tags from the school and church giving trees, donating food and my time at a local food shelter, and participating in 5K walks throughout the year to support all those affected by cancer—past, present, and future.

Lastly, it would be remiss not to reflect on my spiritual connection and faith. I have come to understand that God always has a plan. At the beginning of my mom's cancer treatment, I didn't have the foresight to see the bigger picture, but over time, this became clearer. My own vulnerabilities have been channeled into a source of strength, allowing me to be a support system. My mom is a cancer survivor for roughly one and a half years. While the impact of cancer will forever leave its mark, it continues to inspire me to make a positive difference in the lives of others.