



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

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The Greatest Fight of My Life

When you look at me, you may see nothing different from any other child but what you might not know upon first glance is a few scars despite a smile. I had cancer. This is not something everyone is fond of discussing, but it is true. I am not scared of hiding who I am. Each part of me tells a story, a story I hope to inspire many people with. I want to show people that it is okay to show who you are. Yes, I am a survivor and not everyone is fortunate to still be on this earth today. I am honored to share my experience with cancer, going back to when I was only six months old. Cancer will never define who I am; however, I hope it displays how strong I am and the impact it has had on me and the people in my life.

When I get asked what comes to mind when I think of my cancer journey, I think of the positive experiences despite the difficult moments. Through cancer I saw how much my community could come together to help one another. It made me realize how much we should never take life for granted. If you were to ask me to start talking about how much I remember, I would tell you about how I was in a clinic in the hospital and many kids went there for chemotherapy. I always would look at them wishing I could take their pain away even though I was going through the same thing as them. Knowing I was living a similar experience, I cared about those children and held them deep in my heart. I wanted them to know I understood what they were going through. Therefore, this is my gift to them, to all the kids fighting cancer right now, I am here to tell you to never give up and to always believe in yourself. Although I may not have always felt strong in the moment, this is something I now know. The greatest advice I can give a child suffering through what I had to suffer through is to always stay positive because positivity is what got me here today.

When I was only six months old, I got diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer called Gliofibroma. My doctors found a large tumor at the base of my brain and to my parents' surprise, there were another 19 tumors between my brain and spine. I had brain surgery a few days after the cancer was found to remove as much of the larger tumor as my doctor could. I had many other surgeries, which included brain tumor debulking, external shunt placement, subgaleal shunt, vp shunt conversion, nissen fundoplication, G-

tube, G-tube again, and insertion of a port. I had chemotherapy every Wednesday for a year, and I only ate through a tube until I was three years old. After a while I finally got released from the hospital. Unfortunately, when I was four and a half my cancer came back, which meant another year of chemotherapy. One thing I will never forget is the amount of people who came to visit me and show their support. I remember some of my friends at the time asking me if I was going to be okay and I would always respond with one word, yes. My faith will carry me through it. Some people at school would ask what was wrong but I would not give them a complete answer because I never liked the term “what is wrong?” There is nothing wrong with a child facing cancer. They are going through a painful experience, but there is absolutely nothing they should be ashamed of. I still believe children with cancer are some of the strongest people someone will ever meet. Although these were trying experiences, I learned how to persevere, which I hope others can do as well.

There were both good things and bad moments when battling cancer. My school community was always ready to do anything they could to make my life and the lives of my family easier. My school friends delivered meals almost every night to our house. Fundraisers were held both for me, for other families with a child with cancer, and for research. My picture is still used at Auntie Anne’s Pretzels to raise money for childhood cancer. People were strong for me in the moments when me and my family needed them to be. A lot of people would see me and say they were praying for me and that they had faith in me. My daily progress was uploaded to a blog written by a family friend where anyone could read about my daily ups and downs. I truly felt my community rally around me. I felt love. I have a great big sister who was my constant cheerleader and defender. She was never jealous of the attention I was receiving. For all these things I am forever grateful, and it has made me into the person I am today. Although I gained much strength, there were a lot of difficult moments such as, the weekly chemotherapy and how it would make me feel sick. I developed an allergic reaction to one of the chemo medications so I had to spend the whole day at the hospital for every treatment so it could be given to me over 8 hours. I had to go to the hospital for a few days every time I got a fever which happened frequently, because I had a port. I never knew when I was going to need to be in the hospital.

Thanks to all the prayers, I have not had any treatment since December of 2015, other than routine MRIs and doctors’ visits. When I think back on the experience, I feel very grateful to be alive and for all of the support I received. Having cancer has taught me to be patient, empathetic, and most importantly it has taught me love. I know that I am here because of all the prayers and because God has a plan for me. Not only am I very thankful to God, but my faith has been strengthened through my journey. I have seen how loving people can be. I aim to repay all of the prayers and acts of kindness I have experienced.