



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

Lucy Vogel

Beyond The Diagnosis

Honorable Mention

Grief doesn't begin when someone dies. It begins the moment you realize they may not be here forever. For me, that moment was on October 27, 2024. I remember much of that day, I remember playing two softball games, I remember going to Starbucks after, and I remember going to my best friend Rowan's house after that and playing her piano. Everything felt so normal that day. But most importantly, I remember my mom and stepdad sitting my brothers and I down to tell us the news; my mom was facing stage 2 ovarian cancer. This wasn't the most shocking news, after all, I did witness my mom's ovarian cysts suddenly burst just a couple months earlier. The consistent doctors appointments following that event made me certain that this was coming, I was prepared. I was... prepared, right?

In the months following, my family and I endured what I can only describe as the fear and uncertainty that cancer can and will cause. No matter how much diligence and time is put into cancer research, it is unpredictable and will be different for

everyone. This uncertainty requires cancer's victims to throw their faith to modern medicine, cross their fingers, and hope for the best, because that's truly all we can do. All the news we got, whether good or bad, was scary, because it meant that cancer was there and was moving around in my mom every day. It felt like a monster that we couldn't see, yet its shadow was constantly cast upon us.

And I really mean that, cancer was and is a monster, but not in the way I used to think it was. Growing up, school and my parents taught me that cancer was a creature that worked in mysterious ways. It would plague innocent people for a while, but they would always come out victorious. They may look a bit different, they may have lost their hair, but at the end, the fanfare would play and they would have hopeful and resilient stories to share for the rest of their lives. Nothing could've prepared me for what cancer actually looks like. A week after my mom's diagnosis, my biology class started its cancer unit. That unit opened my eyes to what cancer actually is, and the process humans go through to solve it. Although on certain days the topic made my skin crawl, the unit overall did make me feel better, because it gave me answers. It gave me the real facts and the science behind what was happening to my mom. I highly value this type of cancer exposure, and I think that it's important to make sure every kid and teen fully understands what cancer is and how devastating it can be. We can't avoid the topics that can be uncomfortable or scary, because ultimately discussions on them are necessary. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry claims

that an estimated 3 million adolescents have a parent with cancer. I don't think many of them are given the resources they need to be able to handle that.

I value my mom more than I can even describe for the strength and resilience she's had since her diagnosis. It's not easy to move on with life after getting world-shattering news like that, but my mom handled it with such grace. Even throughout her cancer treatment, she has always helped me with my problems, which I think shows her immense compassion and care for others. Her ability to put others' needs before hers, even when she is exhausted, is something I admire deeply. She didn't just face cancer, she battled it head-on with so much power. Even though she has changed since her diagnosis, I still think of my same mom when I think of her. Her lack of hair or weakened frame don't phase me from the fact that she has the same nurturing and loving heart I know her for.

I still think of my mom as the same person because cancer doesn't define someone, it only holds on to them. Cancer grasped on to my mom and attached itself to her, but it didn't intrude on her identity. My mom and many cancer patients alike are not known just for their cancer, but for their accomplishments and how far they've gone in life. One of the hardest parts of witnessing my mom's cancer journey was seeing the way that people changed around her, how they treated her more delicately and seemed to be only thinking about her cancer when around her. I think this is the case for lots of cancer victims, as their diagnosis begins to become the forefront of their identity. I



know that my mom is so much more than just her cancer, so it's sad to see her identity become washed away by the tidal wave of cancer.

On March 13, my mom finished her last round of chemo. After months of uncertainty and fear, it was honestly beautiful to see the end of it. My mom still is recovering from the effects of chemo and her cancer, so even if she was able to ring the bell and be done with chemo, I think that cancer will always be in our house. But I also know that its grip on our family and house will become weaker and weaker as we recover and move on from this journey.

And I think that speaks to my family's perseverance and strength in the last couple months. We have been able to face one of the human body's deadliest phenomenons as just another part of our everyday life. We are lucky to have each other for support, and I've found that my family has grown closer through this experience. We never lost sight of hope no matter how hard the road ahead seemed.

I wish I could say that there was a conclusion to this story, but there really isn't. Cancer is such a broad and scary entity to be put against, and although it wasn't easy, I think that my family and my mom especially were able to handle it with grace. My understanding of cancer has significantly changed since last year. I've learned that it's not just an illness, but a profound journey that reshapes how we view everything. Overall, cancer has and will continue to impact my family and I for the rest of our lives.