



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

Rhea Davidson

The Daughter of a Superhero

Honorable Mention

Have you ever met anyone that was simply otherworldly? She's something like a movie star or a hero or a fictional character, except she's my mom. I've never met anyone like her; she's ageless, has timeless sense of fashion, she's kind, and a real straight shooter (you always know where you stand with her), she's bold, and bright, and smart, and light.

I have long suspected that my mom had superpowers. Some moms, maybe all, have eyes in the back of their heads, super stretchy arms, sonic hearing and so on. My mom has all those powers too; she also has the power of what I've learned to call *je ne sais quoi*. Sprinkled amongst of all the things I think are marvelous, she's a cancer survivor.

I am very aware of how serious a cancer diagnosis is. I know how it rips through families and ravages people's bodies and identities. How it tears at the seams of all things normal. I'm clear that cancer is a killer. I also know that people that survive cancer are some of the strongest people we could imagine knowing.

Let me tell you about our journey through 2023 and my mom's cancer win.

By the time the clock struck midnight on December 31, 2022, her life had already been thrust into chaos. With one surgery behind her, the looming threat of a cancer diagnosis, and the heartbreaking loss of her (ex) mother-in-law, my grandmother—it was a rocky start to what we had all hoped thought would be a fresh chapter for 2023.

The new year, however, did not disappoint in its relentless challenges. A right breast biopsy, a



breast cancer diagnosis of DCIS and a scheduled lumpectomy were on our family's bingo card for January 2023.

Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is an early, non-invasive form of breast cancer that occurs when abnormal cells develop in the lining of the breast ducts. I remember my mom explaining to me that this was the least invasive type of breast cancer and categorized this cancer as stage zero. She said with hope, this is not the cancer people die from. All of this sounded like garble, more like the teacher on the Charlie Brown cartoons- "*whomp whomp whomp*"- to me.

My mother is a trauma informed professional by trade and has mastered the art of de-escalation as well as co-regulation. I remember very clearly how she sat me and my best-friend (the closest person to a sister, other than my sister who is 16 years my senior) and explained to us what was happening inside her body. She has found an image of a breast, ducts and the progression of normal to cancerous cells and carefully pointed to each stage; she confidently and reassuringly emphasized the area of the photo where her doctor explained she was on the chart- STAGE ZERO. She was calm and her voice melodic during our talk. I was calmed by her affect and left our discussion with a spirit of faith. She had already completed an ultrasound guided biopsy, and MRI. She had scheduled her lumpectomy surgery and rallied the troops for support and then she was referred for six weeks of radiation once she'd healed completely.

April 7th, a day that shattered our world. The love of my mother's life collapsed—three days before her radiation oncology consultation. By the following Thursday, he was pronounced brain dead, and on Saturday, she received the unthinkable call about harvesting his organs. On April 26th, we laid him to rest.

By now, I felt like I was witnessing a shell of my mother roam the earth. Watching my mom endure this heartbreak was unbearable. Her once-vibrant light dimmed, and though she went through the motions, she sobbed—no, wailed—in between.

I cried too, overwhelmed by her suffering and the unfair weight of life's trials. How could a woman that means so much to the world, who loves endlessly and selflessly, friends and sisters from her soul, be asked to endure so much? Why? And what would happen to me and my siblings? At this point I agreed with the doctors, this isn't the type of cancer people die from; but this is the exact type of life stress that sinks ships. My Titanic of a mother was drowning. And



all I could do was watch. I never had to do much of anything but be a good student, be respectful and responsible. I'm the baby and the last child living at home so, I didn't have much responsibility. However, the gravity of what was happening in our worlds was more emotional responsibility than I could bear.

As if grief and her newly added routine of daily radiation sessions weren't enough, Mid-May brought another scare: a severe kidney infection landed her in the hospital, with suspected sepsis. Sepsis is a serious condition in which the body responds improperly to an infection. The infection-fighting processes turn on the body, causing the organs to work poorly. Sepsis may progress to septic shock. This is a dramatic drop in blood pressure that can damage the lungs, kidneys, liver and other organs. She was admitted, and spent 5 days in-patient at our local hospital. On the fifth day, she got up and dressed and informed the attending that she had missed too many days of radiation and needed to get back on schedule. Luckily, she was ready for discharge and by the grace of God, she survived AGAIN!

She completed radiation in June, but the aftermath was brutal. The radiation wreaked havoc on her body and mind, exacerbating her lupus, bringing severe brain fog, exhaustion, and depression. Her heartbreak lingered, the heartbreak was unrelenting. My mom had to stop working for months in order to allow herself the proper time and space to heal.

She cried more than ever before, and almost on cue, but she refused to be consumed with sorrow. She did what I know her to do best and created a system. She designated 15 minutes at the top of each hour for a crying session. At the end of the 15 minutes, she had to dry her eyes and complete a task. If she didn't cry upon the clock's signal, then she had to wait until the next hour to express her grief. We called it the crying hour. Eventually she cried less and less and the hours were pushed back further until finally she cried every night at 6 or 8PM, and now, only on occasion.

The fall came with no reprieve. Two of her lifelong friends lost their mothers within weeks of each other. The trauma of the year was relentless, but my mom—my superhero—kept going. I can recount these events like they're bullet points, but make no mistake, traumatic doesn't even begin to describe the magnitude of it all.



2023 beat me, even as a bystander. There's no poetic way to frame it; it dragged my mother to her knees and pummeled her into the ground. I can't count the hours each of us spent on the floor, in the dark, and under the weight of it all—both figuratively and literally. And at the end, she stood, battered, broken, but blessed. 2023 was wild from start to finish. I never want to carry the burden of the murk I paddled through. But my mother... I don't know that I've ever witnessed such royalty. In between each of her triumphs, she got dressed, put on her signature red lip, and showed up for events large and small, but mostly for people and surely for me. She never missed a school event, a dance recital, a church performance. She drove me to school and collected me at the close of business every single day. Sure, she scaled back on cooking and the house was a bit of a mess but she never shrank.

When asked who my hero is, I always say my mom, not just because she's survived the unthinkable, and cancer, but because of the grace, humor, and love with which she's done it. She's snarky, joyful, and unstoppable—a true Phoenix rising from the ashes. My mom didn't just beat cancer; she triumphed over life's harshest trials. I am the daughter of a superhero.