



2025 Ben Strauss  
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest  
**Samantha Schwartz**  
*Overcoming Cancer Together*  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

---

If you saw my dad walking down the street today, you would never know that 10 years ago he was diagnosed with stage 3b lung cancer and had a prognosis of 18 months to live. 10 years ago, I was in 6th grade and my little sister was only in 1st grade. Today, I am a senior at the University of Delaware and will be graduating this May, with a Bachelor of Science in Biological Sciences and a minor in Genetic Counseling. My sister is now a junior in high school. My sister and I always hated it when my dad would smoke, and even at our young ages we understood the risk of lung cancer being connected to smoking. My dad used to have a job fixing heating and air conditioning units, which involved him jumping on and off the back of a truck. This resulted in a blood clot in his calf. He was sent to a hematologist for his blood clot, and this doctor happened to be an oncologist as well. His doctor insisted my dad get a lung scan because he was a smoker. This doctor taking that initiative saved my dad's life. After my dad began chemotherapy, his cancer tested ALK positive, allowing his treatment to change to taking an ALK blocker. For 9 months, this shrunk his cancer enough to continue that treatment option, but eventually the size of his cancer was not changing. He then began chemotherapy and radiation, and after months of that he returned to the ALK blocker and entered remission. Two and a half years after his initial diagnosis, my dad began to have episodes where he could not speak or read. My mom recognized how dangerous those symptoms are, and insisted he get a brain scan. His lung cancer had spread to his brain, along with the ALK mutation. After undergoing brain radiation, he was then put on an ALK blocker that crosses the blood brain barrier. My dad has been in remission ever since.

Cancer affecting my family while my sister and I were so young made a large impact on us. Before his cancer, my family never had to think about the idea of one of us dying, but cancer forced that reality into our home. This was a very stressful time, causing many negative emotions. This constant fear of whether or not my dad would live consumed us all, and my dad

had his own fears of being perceived differently after his hair loss. He never wanted to be seen as someone who was sick or needed help from others, even when he was going through cancer treatments. He did not like having to rely on others for transportation since he could not drive himself to his brain treatments.

Through this time, we had plenty of support from our friends and family. Friends drove my sister to her art classes and music lessons, and drove me to my marching band practice. One of my closest friends was in marching band with me, and I learned her mom also had cancer. Her mom had breast cancer and received support from Gilda's Club. My dad was initially very hesitant to go, but my mom, sister, and I convinced him we needed additional support. My mom met Christina at Gilda's Club and discussed my dad's cancer diagnosis. Gilda's Club welcomed us with open arms, and we began regularly attending their many events. My sister and I began with Kid's Support, while my parents were speaking with other parents in the Living with Cancer Support Group. My dad began to open up at these sessions and share his feelings of anxiety with others experiencing a cancer diagnosis. He made many friends through Gilda's club, and it did not take long for him to begin to look forward to attending, instead of being completely against it. Everyone was able to discuss their individual fears for their treatments, and over time they saw some people heal and grow after cancer, while others unfortunately did not make it. My dad watched people remarry, grow hair back, and get stronger. My mom was able to connect with other spouses of those who have cancer and still remains friends with them today.

Summer camp was my absolute favorite part of Gilda's Club. Being able to spend so much time with my friend and her siblings made our bond closer than it ever was. I knew her siblings before attending camp, but this experience gave me one on one time with them that I did not have before. Getting to know her siblings more allowed us to become friends, and I look forward to seeing them whenever I go to my friend's house. I still see the friend that introduced me to Gilda's Club whenever I can and we are very close. At camp, my friend and I volunteered to help the younger kids with camp activities. There were many kids our age who did this as well, and we all had so much fun making camp the best it could be for the younger kids. This experience showed me how much I enjoy helping kids, and after this I worked as a babysitter and taught a STEM and Medicine course at another summer camp. Connecting with children helped me realize I wanted to aspire for a career that helps them.

Cancer showed me what I want to pursue as a career. Ever since I was very young, I always thought that rare genetic disorders were so interesting, and I would spend hours watching videos about them and learning as much as I could. My dad's cancer, having a genetic mutation, was very interesting to me and solidified my interest in genetics. I knew I wanted to do something related to helping people through healthcare after seeing how much the doctors helped my dad through his cancer treatment. These factors helped me decide to major in biology. After learning more about biology through my coursework, I decided to pursue a Masters of Public Health in Community Health and Prevention. I want to be able to help as many people as I can in the future, just like how the medical professionals were able to help my dad through his cancer. I

specifically want to use my degrees to help protect mothers and children. Working with kids at the summer camp through Gilda's Club helped spark this passion. I grew up in Philadelphia and have always loved it here, and being able to go to Drexel in the fall allows me to stay with my family, be close to my friends, and be in the city I love.

While cancer takes so much from so many people, my family and I were lucky to have cancer give us a new community through Gilda's Club. I saw how easy it was for people to form a community through a shared experience. While the experience of having cancer is so terrible, there is such a strong bond formed when you are going through the same thing as another person, no matter how terrible it is. Cancer brought my family closer together, and helped us understand how important our lives are and how much more we should appreciate our health. I was able to learn what my dream career is through my cancer experience. Getting through my dad's cancer made me a stronger person, because I now know absolutely nothing is as bad as cancer, and if I got through that I can overcome anything.

My family learned first hand how resilient people are, even after a cancer diagnosis, through the support of Gilda's Club, family, and friends. We have watched friends lose their spouses, parents, and loved ones to this awful cancer diagnosis. My mom, sister, and I are beyond grateful that my dad has been in remission for so long and that he is basically back to normal. While my dad has side effects from his cancer treatment where he is unable to speak clearly, my family knows how to handle them and we all work together to make sure my dad feels okay again after these instances. My dad is able to drive again and regularly attends karate classes where he participates in sparring. We took a family vacation in Pittsburgh to see the Phillies, and my dad drove us there and back. His hair has grown back, arguably a little too frizzy now. My dad has tutored kids in math through Gilda's Club for about 6 years now, which he loves doing. We continue to attend events at Gilda's Club regularly, including baking with Suzanne, summer camp, breakfast with Santa, flashlight easter egg hunt, and a favorite of my family's: turkey bingo. My dad has won a prize at turkey bingo every year without fail, but his favorite part is sharing the delicious thanksgiving dinner with old and new friends alike. Our life seems back to normal, but we do know this disease could return. We take solace in knowing Gilda's is always there to support us.