



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

Shelby Grezlak

Heartbreak and Hope

“I have to go, my daughter is here and she knows something is wrong. I’ll let you know when I leave.”

Hearing those words felt as though my heart stopped, and I was slowly falling (from the sky) without a parachute. My mind was racing (with worries) and wonders of what my mom could’ve meant. There were endless possibilities (of the tragic news) I was about to hear. All I knew was that there were dried tears (on my mom’s cheeks) and a worried expression growing on her face. My mom’s eyes rose to meet mine as her phone fell and bounced off the springs within my couch. *She wasn’t supposed to be home for another hour. Is someone hurt or in trouble? Who was she on the phone with? What did she mean I’ll let you know when I leave?* Thousands (of potential outcomes) filled my brain until I focused (on the muffled words) coming from my mom’s mouth. She took a deep breath, and her eyes, usually full of warmth, were clouded (with sorrow).

“I just got a call from Aunt Kate,” my mom stated, “she just found out that she has cancer. We don’t have much information right now and we won’t know what stage until her

doctor's appointment tomorrow. I need to go down there to support her; your dad will be home later to take you to dance."

I didn't even know what to say or feel; my whole body went numb as I grasped the black wooden railing in front of me, so I wouldn't crash (onto the carpet) below. My chest tightened, and a cold shiver ran down my spine. No matter what I did, the words kept echoing through my mind, each a heavy blow. I didn't cry, I didn't scream, I didn't ask questions; I just used the last bit of strength (within me) to mumble "Okay" and return to my bedroom. *She can't be sick; she's always been the caregiver in my family. Uncle John won't be any help; he had a stroke years ago and still needs Kate to take care of him. All her kids are at college, my grandparents can barely care for themselves, and we live almost 50 minutes away from her.* I knew I was jumping to conclusions, but when I pictured things changing, I suddenly lost all ability to breathe.

Later that night, my sister got home after being out all day. I assumed that my mom had told her the news, but I put on a brave face just in case she hadn't heard yet. The second her eyes met mine I saw them start to water with unshed tears. I could tell these emotions were too much for her to handle; it seemed as though she was trying to hold back a flood with no protection. After standing in silence for what felt like forever, a single tear finally escaped my sister's eye, tracing its path along her cheek. Knowing I needed to comfort my older sister while hiding my own sadness was one of the hardest things I had to do that night. I could see the pain in her eyes, and it mirrored my own. But I knew I had to be strong for her so she would be able to calm down. I swallowed the lump (of grief) filling my throat and blinked back all the forming tears. I walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her trembling shoulders.

“Lindsay, I promise we will get through this together as a family,” I whispered, “Aunt Kate is the strongest person I know, and she won’t give up.”

“I know,” she cried, “thank you.”

I spent the rest of the night reflecting on the news and how to cope with this heartbreaking change. My main goal was to show my aunt that I loved and cared about her because when you have people supporting you, it’s easier to be brave. The biggest lesson I learned from this experience was to always take advantage of the most important things in life because they can disappear faster than you expected. From this point forward, I promised myself that I would always be brave for my family and be a caregiver just as my aunt always was. When people ask me about who my greatest influences are, I will forever mention my aunt. She is the strongest person I know, and she always seems to put others before herself. Cancer doesn’t define anyone, and it truly never defined my aunt.