CANCER SUPPORT COMMUNITY GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2025 Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

Tessa McIntyre

From Struggle to Strength

Honorable Mention

It was almost two years ago. I was a sophomore in high school sitting in my quiet room, the only sound being the AC running. My computer chair, comfy and cozy, helped me type away at my homework. I sharply checked off each assignment on my to-do list until I found myself with the one I thought would be the easiest, a phone call to my grandmother for my wellness class, a simple exercise in discovering diseases that ran throughout the family. It seemed straightforward. But what was meant to be a casual conversation turned into a moment that would redefine my perspective forever. Before long, I was muffling my sobs and reaching for my box of tissues. I moved to my soft bed, hoping it would bury me in its snugness as an attempt to comfort myself from this dreadful news. My grandma was diagnosed with cancer, again.

For weeks, I felt frantic and restless. The mutative, destructive monster I had been warned about my entire life had latched onto my grandma. In that moment, her voice cracking over the phone, all I could feel was a shock of terror running through me. I couldn't speak, I could barely hear her voice trying to explain the beast that lay within her own blood. The words seemed distant, almost unreal, yet all I could think about was how we were going to fight this thing. My mind spiraled with questions that had no immediate answers. In my mania, I decided I was going to do my own research. It was early, we didn't know where this rare type of cancer came from; it seemed as if cancer had arbitrarily decided my grandma was its unlucky pawn—only 5 in 1 million people are diagnosed in the U.S. per year with lymphoplasmacytic lymphoma.

A Google search told me that Lymphoplasmacytic lymphoma (LPL) is a rare, slow-growing type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma that affects white blood cells called B lymphocytes, often resulting in the excessive production of abnormal proteins, leading to a condition known as Waldenström macroglobulinemia. These abnormal proteins can thicken the blood, causing symptoms like fatigue, dizziness, and vision problems. Unlike more aggressive cancers, LPL progresses gradually, but its impact on the immune system and blood circulation can lead to significant health challenges. Treatment often involves targeted therapies, chemotherapy, and sometimes plasma exchange to reduce protein buildup in the blood. Although not typically fatal, the disease can severely affect quality of life, making it a persistent challenge for those diagnosed.

Days went by, I didn't get anywhere in my research. I had gained basic knowledge, but every search result led to jargon-filled papers, endless statistics, and case studies that I struggled to interpret. What was Neurofilament Light Chain or Serum Protein Electrophoresis blood testing? So many tests that even with a definition were impossible to understand. It was incredibly frustrating to feel so helpless in the face of something so vast and unrelenting. I reached a point where I couldn't rely on surface-level knowledge to guide my understanding anymore. I needed more than just raw data and medical terminology. I needed context, clarity, and direction. I tried connecting the dots on my whiteboard, desperate to make sense of it all, but my limited research helped me realize that cancer is nearly impossible to study without proper resources. No matter how much effort I put in, I couldn't find the answers I sought. Defeated, I decided to stop.

The frustration, however, didn't fade. It grew, transformed, and fueled something new within me. I realized while I might not have been able to directly help my grandmother in that moment, I could still channel my energy into something greater. The quiet voice in my mind kept reminding me of my passion for medical science, emphasizing I was meant to thrive in a medical environment. This realization both excited and worried me. I had always known that the medical field was challenging, a path filled with obstacles that required dedication beyond measure. But I also knew, deep down, that this is where I belong. After proving myself through advanced classes and extracurriculars in school, I finally accepted this truth about myself. I didn't just want to learn about medicine—I wanted to be part of the movement that pushes the boundaries of knowledge forward. Although my work may not directly benefit my grandmother, the

trials and errors of cancer research are worth it if they mean I can help someone else in a similar position.

Through it all, my grandmother remains unwavering. Even in the face of pain and uncertainty, she carries herself with a resilience that astounds me. She refuses to let her illness define her, greeting each day with determination and warmth. She still makes jokes, still asks about my day, still reassures me that everything will be okay—even when I know she is the one who needs reassurance the most. Watching her strength has been one of the most profound lessons of my life. She shows me that even in the face of hardship, there is power in perseverance, in choosing to keep moving forward despite the obstacles. Her courage has inspired me to approach challenges with the same tenacity, to face adversity head-on rather than let it consume me.

In learning more about my grandmother's diagnosis, we have found some comfort in understanding that lymphoplasmacytic lymphoma is not life-ending, but it will make her very uncomfortable from time to time. Though still difficult, this knowledge soothed me, allowing me to finally look at my grandma without feeling like I was going to cry again. It's not just about her illness anymore; it's about what I can do with the lessons I've learned. Once again, I am reminded of the fire within me to continue my medical research journey.

In addition to her recent diagnosis, my grandmother is an eighteen-year breast cancer survivor. She was diagnosed with breast cancer the month before I was born, a time that should have been filled with joy and anticipation but was instead shadowed by fear and uncertainty. The strength she displayed during that time is something that continues to inspire me today. As a newborn, I was oblivious to the battle she was fighting, but as I grew older, I came to understand just how much she endured. She faced chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery with an unshakable spirit, refusing to let the disease dictate her life.

Her resilience during that time left a profound impact on me. Knowing that she had already conquered one form of cancer before facing another reinforced the idea that she is one of the strongest people I know. Her journey has shaped my perspective on perseverance and the power of hope. It has also solidified my belief in the importance of cancer research. Seeing firsthand the impact that early detection, medical advancements, and unwavering determination can have on survival has only deepened my commitment to this field.

My grandmother's story serves as a reminder that cancer is not just a statistic—it is a personal, emotional battle that affects millions of families. Her triumph over breast cancer and her continued fight against lymphoma fuel my passion for medicine. They remind me why I am pursuing this path, why I want to contribute to cancer research, and why I refuse to accept the limitations of current treatments. She has taught me that no matter how daunting the challenge, resilience and determination can make all the difference.

If there's anything I've learned from my continued research, it's that cancer's complexity comes from how predictable it can be when it's simply unpredictable. The pattern is in the lack of patterns. A cure for one patient may be tragic to the next. I've heard not only my grandma's story, but also those of friends, loved ones, people online, and countless medical studies. I see the pain this vile disease inflicts on people, and it ignites my craving for change. I seek to further the world's knowledge of cancer and, at the very least, help to limit the suffering of those who are exposed to cancer's touch as much as possible. Perhaps my grandmother's diagnosis was the spark, but the fire within me will continue to burn long after the embers of this moment fade. This experience gave me the direction I had been searching for—I realized that I wanted to major in chemistry in college, to build the foundation necessary to contribute to the scientific community and make real progress in the fight against diseases like my grandmother's.

Now, as I prepare to attend college in the fall, I carry her strength with me. I know the path ahead will be challenging, filled with long nights of studying, rigorous coursework, and moments of self-doubt. But I also know that I have the resilience to push forward, just like my grandmother has. Her battle has taught me the value of perseverance, of facing difficulties with courage and determination. As I step onto campus for the first time, I will do so with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to immerse myself in the world of chemistry and research, knowing that every step I take brings me closer to making a real difference in the fight against diseases like hers. My ultimate goal is to conduct cancer research, fully aware that this path requires years of study and advanced degrees. I am ready to commit myself to this journey, knowing that the knowledge and skills I gain will enable me to contribute meaningfully to the search for better treatments and, ultimately, a cure.