



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Essay Contest

Victoria D'Ulisse

A Goodbye Left Unsaid

2nd Place

What is the difference between “bye” and “goodbye?” The former ends a phone call or is exchanged at the end of a family barbecue. The latter implies permanence: you will never see that person again. I never realized the importance of saying goodbye until that chance was taken away five years ago. The last words I said to my father were “See you later” when I thought I would be seeing him again the next day in the same hospital room he lived in for months. Unfortunately, his three-and-a-half-year battle with leukemia took that chance away from me.

The thing about cancer is that it takes your loved ones away from you before the doctor tells you they’re gone. Cancer tears your family apart at the seams and throws your life into a continuous cycle of turmoil and emotions. My family would spend weeks at a time driving to the hospital to visit my dad, go through the joyous stages of thinking he was finally healthy, only to be let down a month later with the news that we needed to start over again. This cycle took a toll on every member of my family.

I watched my father, the man I did science experiments with on the deck and danced to Katy Perry up and down our hallway with, turn into a shell of himself. He was mentally distant, complained about feeling foggy, and suddenly my math homework gave him pause. My dad, the man I trusted most in life, started to fade away the moment he entered that hospital room. The mental wear and tear that cancer burdens our loved ones with is the reason why “goodbyes” sneak up on us, and it was the reason I didn’t get the goodbye I wished I had. You can never tell if the end is coming, because part of our loved ones are already gone.



For the thirteen-year-old version of myself, my father's cancer took a toll on me as well. Looking back, I realized how much I retreated into myself over those three years and the subsequent years after he passed. I never wanted to hang out with friends, I just wanted to sit at home in peace and quiet. There is one thing that I still struggle to admit today: towards the end of his treatment, I dreaded visiting my dad in the hospital. I hated the drive into the city, the pitying looks the hospital workers sent my way on the long trek across the building complex, and the fact that this routine was my life. After he passed, I couldn't bring myself to admit these feelings to anyone. I felt as though I was a selfish daughter who should have been more understanding of my family's situation. However, it has taken me to this point in time, to this essay, to realize that these feelings are normal. I was never mad at my dad, I loved him with all of my heart and would give the world for him to be back with me today, but I was and still am mad at our situation. Why did the world give my father an incurable disease? Every subsequent moment in my life will never be the same without my father, and that fact is deserving of my emotions.

It is these emotions that brought about Everyday Hope. About three years ago I started a charity organization that aims to tackle the mental health issues that surround cancer. All of my projects have been based on the experience my father had in the hospital, and what I believe he could have benefited from. We create care packages filled with items specially designed to offset the mental deficits that occur when a patient is hospitalized for a long period of time. With items ranging from crossword books and decks of cards to warm hats and essential oils to help you sleep, Everyday Hope's goal is to provide cancer patients with the support where oncology doctors are unable to.

I plan on continuing Everyday Hope for the rest of my life and expanding its impact across the nation. However, the goal of Everyday Hope is not just to improve the mental environment of oncology floors, but also to make sure that if the time to say goodbye comes, you haven't already lost your loved one. Although my last words to my father weren't what I had wished they had been, I know he had been gradually fading for months before his passing.

Everyday Hope has the ability to keep patients in the present, and I dream of a day when no thirteen-year-old girl has to watch her dad suffer from more than just a disease.

My story with cancer is more than just the death of a parent. It was full of hidden emotions and untold stories. I have never told someone that I regret the last words to my dad, or that towards the end of my time with him I never wanted to visit. Cancer took



away my father, my favorite person in life, and it took away a little part of myself. However, my story with cancer did not end there. It caused Everyday Hope to take form, and maybe I can help other girls like myself who are going through the most confusing time of their lives. Maybe I can help people like my dad from fading away due to the harsh realities of cancer treatment. I will forever be grateful for the time I had with my dad, and I will forever be grateful that despite the bad that cancer has caused in my life, some good has still come from it.