



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
Middle School Essay Contest

# Zachary O'Brien

*Navigating the Emotional and Mental  
Aftermath of Cancer*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

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Being at school can be challenging for a child, more than ever, when you are dealing with cancer. Personally, two influential events in my life after my father died were returning to school and telling people at school. These events are sentimental because they made me confident in discussing cancer. These learning experiences made me stronger as my life evolved without my father.

Once I arrived back at school after my father died, I was devastated because I didn't know how to communicate with my peers due to the mental and emotional state in my life. I had not seen anyone other than my family for weeks. I felt like a deflated balloon walking through the halls. On my first day back, I was bombarded by questions from my classmates about absences from school, and it made me feel like a "fish out of water." One moment in the hallway, my teacher rescued me from the unsettling questions. Today, I am still grateful. She sat down with me to discuss, "I know this may be hard for you, getting attacked by these questions." I nodded because I didn't even want to be there. She later described the support I have around me,



including my mother, brothers, and teachers; I have a space to fall. Her words calmed the heavy weight I was carrying at school. Reflecting on her advice helped my self-esteem, but it also filled me with confidence I will have for the rest of my life.

I could use this confidence to inform my peers about this dreadful event years later. I was on the playground talking to my friends when I finally decided to tell them about the death in my family. My heart beat a million beats per second; I was scared they would laugh at me and make me leave the playground, but instead, they comforted me with how I was feeling. I told my friends I was more confident telling others what happened and how I felt. When I returned to class, I went to my teacher feeling scared, but then I was reminded of my other teacher and how she had said that teachers would always be there for me. I approached her and asked if I could announce it to my peers. She wondered what it was, so I told her what happened. She offered to make the announcement; I declined, feeling this was my responsibility. I took a deep breath and said, "Hi, everyone, my dad died last year." I paused, letting it sink in. "I never said anything because I was too scared to tell you. When it happened, I wasn't at school for multiple weeks because I was coping with this." Then I stopped. It was like my mouth was taped shut. My teacher asked if anyone had questions. Despite my discomfort, I decided to answer three questions. After those questions, I avoided everyone for the rest of the day, but I still felt good about sharing what I had battled and my experience with cancer. In the end, it contributed to me vocalizing, more freely, the pain cancer has caused in my life.

I am currently comfortable and calm when talking about my father. A recent example of this was when I was in class and heard some kids talking about their fathers. It caught me off guard overhearing one kid stating, "Dads are so stupid and annoying." Another said, "Yeah, they

don't do anything right and never leave me alone." I got frustrated and started to dwell on my feelings, exclaiming mentally, "*Those three have no idea how lucky they are! We should switch even for one day!*" I then thought back to everything I had been through. I realized that no matter the person, even if they are unkind, I should never wish that upon them. After waiting to speak to them privately, I asked them to be more considerate and grateful. If I had been immature, I would have screamed at them, cried, and run away; however, now that I am older and wiser, I acknowledged that would be inappropriate, and I contained myself and handled it silently. As a result, without the teachings I gained over the years, I would have acted more rashly. I am grateful for everything I have learned and used so I can handle situations like this maturely.