CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

4th Annual Ben Strauss Higher Education Grant 2026

2nd Place

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Love and Time

The school bus brakes screech to a stop; I hop out and sprint up towards our front door. The moment I see my parents, my nine-year-old self starts rattling off about all the little things we did in class today. We wrote short stories, learned about the solar system, and started working with percentages. Usually my parents would lean in, and ask about every little detail. Their curiosity would add to my excitement.

This time was different; something seemed off with my parents. “Maybe Mom and Dad are a little tired today,” I thought to myself, trying to reconcile the unexpected silence. A little later my dad sat me and my older sister down on their bed. My dad had an expression that I have never seen him wear before or since. His face showed a distinct mix of tension and panic, yet also a strange, pained humor. It was like he was desperately trying to hold back a scream, a sob, and a nervous laughter all at once. After a small pause, my dad broke the silence with one sentence: Mom has breast cancer.

“Cancer.” I had never heard of it before, but the sound of my sister’s tears told me that she had. My dad continued explaining, his voice steady yet distant, but the words stopped registering meaningful language to me. I watched my sister sob and my father reach out trying to console her, and I felt a strange, cold sense of detachment from the situation. I felt like I was an observer in my own life. At nine years old, I thought the situation would resolve quickly, and things would go back to the way they were. “This must be just some bad flu that would be over in a few weeks” I thought to myself, without knowing that this was the start of a decade-long journey for me and my family.

The early years are full of memories of the other adults around me subtly acting differently. Teachers, neighbors, and family friends would give much longer hugs, and say things that were intended to be comforting, but felt like warnings: “You must be so brave,” or “I know this must be tough for you.” Their words made me slowly and uncomfortably realize that our family was going through a tragedy that would last for many years. The attention I was getting felt misplaced. I did not want to have to be “brave” or “strong.” I just wanted to go back to the time before so much of our family’s time together got replaced with constant trips to different doctors.

The transition from a passive to a more active member of my family happened in stages. The first major shift came with chemotherapy. My mother had to shave her head, which cracked my subconscious defense mechanisms. The great volume of curly hair that was a core part of her identity to me was simply gone. It was more than just the hair that changed; it was the sense of familiarity it brought with her. The cancer that had seemed abstract before now carried a constant physical reminder. My mother's hair was a symbol of her presence; with its absence, my vision of her as this perfect mother fell away. She was human, she was fragile, and she was in pain. This realization was terrifying to me.

As I grew up, the diagnosis grew up with me. The cancer progressed to metastatic breast cancer, and with it the promise of a return to the way things were previously vanished. We were no longer a family trying to beat a temporary illness; we were a family learning to live with a permanent struggle. This situation forced a maturity that my peers did not have to face yet. While my friends were navigating the typical dramas of middle and high school, I was watching the woman who taught me how to move through the world struggle to move through our hallway. Many of the problems that seemed earth-shattering before, now seemed petty in comparison.

An unexpectedly painful part of this progression was the premature loss of activities that brought me and my family joy together. We were a family that loved to go skiing every winter. The slopes carried many fond memories of growth. I remember falling on my wrist, forced to wear a cast temporarily, and abruptly ending the season for me. Thankfully, I was young and was able to fully heal, but the same would not be true of my mother. The cancer treatments made my mother's bones fragile, so she was forced to retire the skis. Although my sister, dad, and I were still able to ride the slopes, the air felt different without her. The joy was no longer the same. Witnessing my mother give up something she loved was about more than just a change in hobbies; it was a manifestation of what cancer takes. It was physically stopping us from doing what we love together. This forced me to confront the reality that my parents might not live to the old age I had always assumed they would.

These losses are what transformed my sense of family. Before the diagnosis, we were held together by habit and the natural gravity of being a household. Now, we are held together by a fierce, conscious intentionality. We realized that time with your loved ones is not guaranteed; it is a finite resource. This perspective made us value what time we do have together more. As a senior in mechanical engineering, my days are often full of complex equations, models, and projects. However, the weight of my mother's health gives me perspective that most of my classmates often lack.

I see my peers ignoring calls from their parents, groaning that they'll call them back later, operating under the assumption that their home will always be as they left it. This is an assumption I cannot make. I call my mother every week while I am away. These calls are rarely brief, we talk about everything from the mundane things like the weather or what we ate, to the engineering projects I am working on, to my plans for coming back to Philadelphia after graduation. Our conversations are an active choice to remain a core part of her life. They are my way of telling her without having to say the hard part that I am still here and our time together matters.

The sense of community expanded beyond my immediate family, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. My mother was immunocompromised, so the world became much more dangerous for our household. Even basic tasks like going to the grocery store carried the risk of bringing back a life-threatening virus. This time really expanded my meaning of community; I saw family friends step up to help us. They would bring cooked meals and groceries to our door to keep us safe. The same pickled cabbage and pork meal that I once begrudgingly ate at a family friend's house now had a new layer to it. The dish was a physical manifestation of the protection they are offering. I realized our friends' efforts to keep us safe was a form of love that did not need words. The love itself was part of the dish.

Seeing the level of support and sacrifice changed what I thought a community meant. A community is so much more than a group of people who live near each other. It is also a safety net that is there when people need it most. This experience taught me that being part of a community means being willing to carry part of someone else's burden for them, so they do not collapse under the weight of it.

Moments like these evolved my concept of family over the past decade with cancer. My childhood had a simple, idyllic image of family where nothing seriously goes wrong and we are just “there.” I see the tragic yet beautiful reality of a family that is with each other when things go wrong. This growth was not a choice, but a requirement for our situation.

Watching my mother struggle with basic tasks that she used to do with ease is still a painful process. The troubles of dealing with cancer never go away, and there is no reality where the cancer is any kind of gift. Cancer has taken my mother’s mobility, her hair, our shared winters on the mountain, and much more. It is a thief. However, in the void that cancer left behind, we have built a truly special family. We are a chain forged in fire, and we are only as strong as our ability to protect our most vulnerable links.

Graduation on the horizon carries with it many new opportunities. I bring these values of family and community with me everywhere I go. Whether I am entering a professional environment, building new friendships, or starting a family of my own, I carry these lessons with me. My mother’s condition has taught me that while we cannot control the hand we are dealt, we have control over how we value the time we have. This sense of intentionality and fiercely valuing time and community will strengthen everything I do. The confused nine-year-old boy now understands what it means to stand by those you love.