



13th Annual Ben Strauss

Middle School Essay Contest 2026

Honorable Mention

Caitlin Quigley

Dad's Journey Through My Eyes

I just turned 4 years old when my Dad was diagnosed with melanoma. I was so young that I didn't know what it was or how much it would affect me. Cancer has made my life tough, but because of it, I've had some amazing experiences. I have grown through programs like Gilda's and other organizations that help families impacted by cancer. My Dad's fight with Melanoma lasted 5 years, from July 2017 to July 2022. He was already stage 3 when he was diagnosed and the doctors told him that he had a low chance of surviving 5 years. He was determined to prove them wrong.

During my Dad's treatments, my siblings and I often stayed with our relatives. I especially remember doing a painting at my cousin's house one day. We covered our hands with paint and pressed them onto a canvas. I had a fun time with my cousins on that day as we created a painting with all our handprints when we were little. Looking back, I realize my family was trying to distract us and make happy memories.

I remember visiting my Dad in the hospital by myself before one of his surgeries. I went by myself because I was too upset to go when my siblings visited. I left school



early that day to see him. I don't remember exactly what happened in the room, but I do remember being happy to see him.

Approximately 5 years after the diagnosis, the doctors told my Dad that his treatments weren't working and he only had a few months left to live. My Mom and Dad called us into the living room. When they told us, we didn't know what "*treatments not working*" meant. My sister was the one who first figured out what it meant. "Does that mean you're ... *dying*?" she asked. "Yes," my Dad replied. It was the saddest day of my life. After that, my Dad was almost always in his bed or on a green La-Z-Boy recliner. We had lots of visitors daily.

On July 4, 2022, we had most of my family over at my house. Most people went to the parade, except for some of my aunts, uncles, Mom, and Dad. I was worried that he would die during the parade and I wouldn't be able to say goodbye one last time. When I got back, he was still in his recliner, watching a replay of the Phillies win the World Series in 2008. I played knockout with most of my family outside, while my Mom and my uncle grilled burgers and hot dogs. I could see a large flame coming from the grill, along with some smoke. I was terrified, as I thought that the house was going to burn down, but luckily the food was just burnt. We cooked the extras, then we all went inside to eat. That night, we went to see the fireworks. I felt great watching them, not having to worry. For the first time in a while, I thought that everything would be ok. I was wrong.

I woke up the next morning after staying with my grandparents and watched TV with my siblings. Later, I went back to my house and found my Dad in his green La-Z-Boy recliner. I hugged him, relieved to see him. I slept over at my cousin Keira's house that night, but before I left, I unknowingly said a final goodbye to my Dad. I still have a hard time thinking about those last moments because they make me so upset. I was completely torn apart when Mom came over to my Uncle's house to deliver the saddest news of my life. Mom brought the barf bucket because she knew I would cry so hard that



I would vomit. “I’m so sorry to say this, but Daddy passed away,” mom told us. I was speechless at first, then I started bawling my eyes out. I was crying hysterically, and I was gagging. Everyone around me reacted similarly.

Looking back, I realize how deeply my father’s death affected all of us. It brought up emotions that I’m trying to cope with. Even though it was the hardest time of my life, it made me understand how important family support is during times of grief. I will never forget the love and kindness we shared, and I know that, no matter what, my family and I can get through anything together.