



13th Annual Ben Strauss

Middle School Essay Contest 2026

Honorable Mention

Caitlyn Kulik

My Story

When I found out that my dad had cancer, I was four, turning five years old. I didn't know what it was. I thought that everything was going to be okay and he would be out of the hospital soon. I was told by mom and dad that I could give Dad gentle hugs. Dad went to a lot of doctor appointments and our neighbors helped with daycare for my sister and I. At the beginning of his treatments, I didn't notice a lot of changes.

After a year of treatments, Dad's hair started thinning and falling out. Mom would make him a mohawk, and she tried to cut his hair. (This was during COVID.) Dad was very easy going and laughed at all the unevenness of mom doing his hair.

COVID was an interesting time in our family. We were home together all the time. Dad went to treatment and Mom was not able to go with him. We were taking classes at home and I remember not being able to play with neighbors because we had to protect Dad. Dad was sick and could not fight off infections, so we stayed together as a tight family. Dad designed and worked on our swing set from scratch. He loved designing things.

Dad went to the hospital in an ambulance. We were all worried. I thought he was going to be okay and come home, but I was wrong. I remember sitting on my bed wishing and hoping that he would come home. A couple of days later, he sadly passed. It was very hard for a while. We



still keep the family traditions that we did when we were younger. Mom and Dad had different versions of our nighttime prayer that we would say every night. In the end, we ended up sticking with Dad's version. It's a nice way to keep him in our memories and remember that he is watching over us. I miss him a lot.

I was ending 3rd grade and starting 4th grade after summer break. I never told any of my classmates except some of my friends. Still people in my classes didn't know, yet, but I want to make sure that I didn't get bullied for it.

I was bullied a lot. Honestly they probably thought that I was an easy target. I was pretty emotional at the time. I built myself walls and used them to keep my feelings from showing. Fifth grade was when I felt more comfortable. I started taking down some of the walls, but I left some up. After what happened with the bullies, I wanted to have at least one wall up, if I had to deal with a bully, again.

I still have that wall up, but I don't use it as much. I really only use it to keep a straight face when my teacher hands out a test or when I feel like groaning because we get a lot of homework. Sometimes I still groan though.