



13th Annual Ben Strauss
Middle School Essay Contest 2026
Honorable Mention

Christopher Thomas

Honest Lessons from Cancer

One of the truest quotes I have ever been told is “You can have 1000 problems in your life. Until you get sick. Then you have one problem.” For me, my mom got sick, and it became essentially our family's biggest problem to this day

I grew up having a great childhood very early on. I had many friends, fun games to play outside, and fun in school. Both my parents were happy and very healthy. Me, my sister, and my Mom and Dad were all very happy and completely normal. Then the world spun over on itself. In the same year as covid, my mom was diagnosed, and I was only in second grade. This came to be what I believe was the hardest thing that defined and shaped everything about me.

Health becomes a lifestyle. When you become very ill it encapsulates your thoughts and makes simple things seem impossible to accomplish. Mom having cancer meant her not driving us many places, it meant rearranging schedules so we could make sure she got the attention she



needed. It was about the sacrifice of what we wanted. Mom hated to see that for us. She tried her best to still stay the same, but her healing was holding it back. This meant taking on her responsibilities and duties that she had previously upheld.

I often see myself in a role that has always felt highly mature and well above my age in understanding a multitude of concepts. I attribute the majority of that to the battle of cancer with my Mom. What it does to a person so young, to have them understand and accept the unknown, to appreciate what we have more, to handle emotions, and to have faith above all else is something so powerful that neither school nor personal seeking would ever teach. To be put into a hard situation, to see your family so emotionally vulnerable like never before, especially when being so young, and to come out being stronger in the end shaped my family and I immeasurably.

An idea I have come to understand very early on is a person's care is often shown through their actions not their words. When someone has not experienced a situation like mine for themselves, it is in their nature to simply sympathize. "I'm sorry to hear that" or "If you ever need to talk I'm here" have been thrown at our faces as if they were robots programmed to respond the same. They do not understand because they have not experienced it. They cannot comprehend your experience. How it affects your way of thinking and its constant existence in the back of your consciousness at all times. Those who understand are quite special though. Those who made meals on Mom's chemo days, who sent flowers, and who would watch over me and my sister at a moment's notice. Organizations such as For Pete's Sake, Cancer Support Community, and Camp Kessum offer ways to reach out and understand more of what it may all be like.

The hardest battle of all is found in the times alone. When you come home and see how stressed Dad may seem, or how exhausted Mom is. We see these ourselves, and they often hurt the most. But I also know that there is, in that, a sense of feeling different and isolated. In all that mess of emotions, those very emotions bring us unity. The simple truth of bonding over a shared



struggle brings us into a sense of unity. It brings us together at those organizations as well. The negativity has brought a positive aspect to it all. We relate to something that has made us feel distant and disconnected. That is one of the most incomparable bittersweet feelings I have ever felt. I encourage you to go out, to assist someone you know that may be struggling with something formidable in their life. Talk to them. Say honestly: "I may not relate to how you feel entirely, but you can trust me to always be there." A person who is honest to help is truly one of the greatest blessings to have in difficult times. Cancer is a hard thing to get through, especially when you are young. But together, we can power through it, and learn many things along the way. A health problem becomes your only problem, and my mom is healing, and we are healing, together, not alone, and supporting each other throughout it all.