



**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
Higher Education Grant 2026  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

**Emily  
Schwartz**

*Family*

This is my last year in high school, I'm not even considered a child anymore. Now cancer has been prevalent for over half of my life. My dad's had cancer forever. By forever I mean since I was about nine years old. I still remember the weekend my mom found out. She couldn't stop crying, and kept saying it was a really sad movie. I believed her, why wouldn't I? My sister had gone to the shore with a friend's family that weekend, when she came home we sat in my parents bed. Einstein, the family cat, was sitting in the middle of their bed. Unbothered, as we sat around her. I pet her, as my parents talked to us. I don't fully remember who said it, but I didn't have the reaction that was expected. "We told you to stop smoking. What did you expect?" Which somehow wasn't related. My dad had stage four lung cancer. He had about six



months to live. Which we hadn't been fully told yet. We knew it wasn't simply a 'get rid of it' cancer, this was more complex. For months my dad came home with burns on his chest. He needed a burn cream and bandages to protect him. Even now, his skin is scarred. But at least my dad's cool now, he has three tattoos. They were placed to line everything up for the radiation, three itty bitty dots on his chest and stomach. I remember not fully knowing what to feel. I was scared, but this is *my* dad. Nothing can happen to him. Until it did. My dad who was never even near a normal weight was becoming smaller. The physical changes scared me. Now it's actually real. I can't see his lungs being attacked, I just hear about it. But I see the scars getting worse. My dad losing weight. My dad losing energy. The pills each morning. It got better, it became bearable. Until it was worse. In 2017 my sister's friend, Emily, told my sister about her mom's experience. Her mom was better, but she knew that being better doesn't always mean it feels better. I am forever grateful to her. She told us about Gilda's Club and Camp Kesem. I remember the first time I went, it was baking with Susanne.

Susanne is one of the most incredible people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. She loves baking, but even more she loves being there. She was there for us all. I remember being so nervous, and she made us feel so comfortable. Susanne helped us make cinnamon rolls, pretty easy, but much more fun with her there. I kept giggling, I don't even remember if there was anything specific said, or if she was just being goofy with us. This was also when I met Kyra, one of my favorite people. Day one, and I had built these connections that still mean the world to me, nine years later. Kyra and her mom sat next to us, and we instantly clicked. So did our moms. Since that day we haven't shut up if we're in the same room. We, meaning our moms to each other as well. From there, I started going to Group. I honestly don't remember the name of it, it was always Group to us. We talked about some of the most uncomfortable topics in a comfortable environment. Kyra and I only got closer, and we met Junie Moony and her



sister Emmy. Then we became more annoying for Karen and Kathy, the ladies who ran Group. Everything was explained in a way that I could actually understand, with such care and support. I'm glad I'm not at a point where I need Group anymore, but I will miss the nights when we stupidly tried to freak each other out in the 'scary' upstairs of the house. I don't have to miss Kathy's cupcakes, since she still brings them to events. I felt at home. I felt actually supported. I've struggled with maintaining friends, even still. But every single summer, it doesn't matter. Camp Kids is always there for me.

I started as an uninterested camper, bored to be honest. As I became a counselor, I still find so much in Camp Kids. It isn't just a silly camp. I've sat and had serious conversations with some kids who probably don't want to bring things up at home. I talked to a younger girl about my own experience with therapy when she brought hers up to me. It's supposed to be a distraction, but at the end of the day, Camp Kids is whatever you need. A dumb game? A horrendous skit that Christina made last second for us to make fools of ourselves? Or just a place to be comfortable. That is Camp Kids. That's also what's brought me to some of my favorite people. A bunch of the counselors went out, dressed up, for the minions movie. Never sitting in the front row again. But it was the most ridiculous best night it could've been. I wouldn't be where I am today without it. My summers aren't filled with crazy things, they're filled with the laughter of the kids while putting stuffed animals on Matteo while he's asleep. They're filled with the watermelon juice that drips as Garrett tries to eat as fast as possible while somehow breathing. They're filled with the love for each and every kid who goes home to feelings that are way too adult for them to have to deal with. It's the time a kid felt sick, so he slept in the house with the giant panda bear as I kept him from falling off. My little Ikea monkey brings so much joy to a kid I hardly know. This connection, built in a few weeks, transcends what I can express here. So much trust built in the other counselors and even the campers, I hate the next summer. Everyone gets a little bit



taller, they grow, no longer the young kids I knew before. But now these teenagers that are such wonderful people. Who I've seen for years become the best versions of themselves. No matter what, I can help at Gilda's. I'll always have that family. Even now, as I'm putting down my deposit for college, moving forwards in my life, I'm missing it. I'm missing summer. But I don't have to miss my friends, I don't have to miss those who have been there for me.

I see Beth at my school's wellness fair, waiting for the Kesem people to show up, and I can just talk. I can feel comfortable in a room where I know one person. I can feel comfortable knowing someone understands, someone is there for me. Someone from my family is there to support me. Camp Kesem is so connected yet so different. A sleepaway camp for a week, with no one you know. The only thing in common-cancer is or was in a parent's life. We all know it. The first few days we get comfortable. Until Empowerment hits. The cancer day. We address it. It's no longer an unspoken thing, we talk so directly about it. How much it sucks. To the point that there's a sign that quite literally reads, 'Cancer Sucks' that we throw paint at. I've been going for nine years to Kesem, this is my final year as a camper. It hasn't hit me yet, but it will. Every single year, the end of the week, I sob. I don't cry. It's not surface level. I'm full on nose dripping body shaking hiccupping gasping ugly sobbing. I'm leaving them. Until the next summer. Which will never be quite the same. I get to experience it again. Gilda's is best in the summer, but Kesem doesn't exist. Sure, we have a friends and family day every once in a while, but it never hits the same way. We aren't there, crying in each other's arms about how much it sucks, how badly we don't want to go. How deeply we care for one another.

This has built me as a person. They have a few sayings. Kesem is magic, but the one that I really feel is we're all under the same moon and stars. No matter how much it sucks, no matter how hard a day feels, the summer is there. Waiting for the laughter



and the connections to come back. But even when they're not physically there, we can look up into the sky. Remember the last day of camp we giggle and sob, stargazing, together. Not wanting the morning to come, not wanting to go. Those same stars whenever I miss that feeling, whenever I miss my Kesem family. I have never been more grateful for anything in my life. Sure, cancer sucks, I wish my dad didn't have a ton of pills to take in the morning and I wish I never had to watch him lose his voice or have any seizures. What makes it suck a little less is the people I've met from it. I wish my dad didn't have his cancer ever or for it to come back, but at the very least I've been able to find my people. Family isn't only blood related, family is people who understand you, love and support you unconditionally.