



13th Annual Ben Strauss

High School Essay Contest 2026

Honorable Mention

Jenna Yoder

The Piece of My Heart that Became a Star

The day went by like a small summer cloud, a dream. But, when my friend got sick, it felt like a sudden storm was rolling in on a sunny day. I was a younger girl and didn't really understand what was going on. I was confused when I saw her less and less. Each time I visited, she looked a little more tired, like a candle slowly burning lower and lower. I was told that she had cancer. My heart felt like it was carrying a heavy backpack filled with worry and love at the same time. Back then, I was walking through a thick fog, completely blind to what cancer actually was. I foolishly believed her illness was just a passing rain shower and that she'd return as her vibrant, spunky self in no time. But I was looking at a hurricane, not a typical rainstorm. Her journey had just started.

Like a dying flame, I watched her vitality flicker and dim, her hair thinning with each passing season. She buried herself in heavy clothes, a cocoon against the encroaching cold. Seeing her ravaged by sickness, again and again, there was a heavy stone on my heart. Even so, her smile shined like sunlight breaking through dark clouds whenever she saw me. She always asked how I was doing and cared about others, even when she was hurting.

As I stood there, I started to daydream about the past, hearing laughs, giggles, and cries playing back in my head. With my best friend by my side, I sat in the chair feeling like a balloon stretched tight with nerves. The wails of the other children and the sharp *click* of the piercing gun felt like a siren warning me away, making my desire for earrings evaporate into thin air. *I can't do this, I am scared!* I heard a soft, mellow voice tell me that “it’s ok” and that “you got this.” We went hunting for the perfect pair of earrings. After a long treasure hunt for my petite lobes, she unearthed the perfect pair: two tiny, captured pieces of the midnight sky, whispering, it's time.

“I can’t wait for you to get your ears pierced because now we will be twinning!” my friend exclaimed. So there we went, dancing to the chair, step by step. This was when the nerves started to kick in. My ears were waiting like blank canvases, ready for the quick, cold bite of the needle to leave behind a permanent glint of silver. Beside me, she is a calm harbor in my storm. Her eyes pour a soothing balm directly into my anxious soul, her hand a lifeline in my grip. I hear the countdown of “3...2...1...” I’m sure my heart was trying to punch its way out of my chest. The piercing gun clicked like a camera capturing a brave moment, and the sharp pinch stung like a bee. My eyes had become two flakes of glitter. I hear cheering and excitement in the background, “You did it!” Even through the pain, when it was over my ear throbbed, but my smile shined brighter than the tiny earrings- proof that the pain was worth it with my friend by my side.

I would chase that moment the way the ocean chases the shore, again and again, just to feel it one more time. The memory lives in my heart like a song stuck on repeat, and I’d rewind time in a heartbeat to hear our laughter echo once more. I’d give anything to step back into that second, to hold it tight before it slipped away like sand through my fingers. Anything to get that spunky, sassy, loving young girl back. That memory is my anchor, the only thing keeping me steady in a world that feels suddenly too quiet. I’ve replayed it so many times, the edges are worn thin, but the feeling remains absolute—pure, unadulterated, and vibrant.

I see her everywhere I go.



Losing her was painful but knowing her taught me how powerful kindness can be. Now her memory lives like a soft song that plays in my mind when I need comfort. I try to smile for others the way she always smiled for me. Her dream sparkled like a wrapped present waiting under a tree, full of hope and kindness. She wanted to give toys to kids in the hospital during the holidays so they wouldn't feel alone. When she talked about it, her eyes glowed like holiday lights. Even when she was very sick, she cared more about other kids smiling. Her idea felt like a warm blanket spreading through the cold hospital halls. After she was gone, I remembered her dream and knew her kindness would keep living on through the joy she wanted to give others. And it does.