



**13<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
High School Essay Contest 2026**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

# Joelle Chong

## *A Life Measured at the End*

When my teacher first read this quote by the ancient Greek philosopher Solon in my English class, “Count no man happy until he is dead,” I thought it was just another idea from a book. Although it seemed profound, it was far away. I never really understood how to judge an entire lifetime, or how one could possibly determine whether their life had been happy until the very end. This type of understanding doesn’t occur while reading or memorizing. It occurs through experiencing. It wasn’t until my uncle that I finally understood what that quote really meant.

My earliest recollection of my uncle was his laugh. It was loud, unfiltered, and unavoidable. As much as I hate to say it, it was like a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day, filling every space in our house on Sundays when we all came together for Sunday dinners. Platters of food clicked against plates, conversation overlapped, voices echoed throughout the dining area, and nothing compared to the warmth of his laugh. In my mind, he was not simply my uncle. He was my coach, my accomplice, and in many ways, my second father.

We never separated; we extended beyond the immediate family; we were tightly knit. But cancer changed each of us. Now, I see that this pain taught me the most valuable lesson: how to live without regret.

Prior to his cancer diagnosis, my uncle was at the center of everything. He had a unique ability to transform everyday experiences into unforgettable ones. Regardless of whether he blasted music

on road trips, initiated impromptu yard games, or encouraged everyone to stay awake a bit later, he made life feel full. One memory that continues to stand out in my mind is a beach trip. He woke everyone up before sunrise. I remember protesting, half asleep and annoyed; however, he just laughed and told me, “These are the moments you won’t get back.” Watching the colors of the sky begin to change as I stood on the beach, I didn’t comprehend anything at that time either. I do now. He was teaching me how to live. He did not wait for the ideal time. He created it. He lived with intentionality and purpose; I am certain he had no regrets.

Cancer became part of our lives the morning we received the news of his diagnosis. A sense of disorientation consumed the room. Words such as 'stage' and 'treatment' were foreign and seemed to belong to someone else’s story. Yet, suddenly, they were part of our lives. The atmosphere of our lives began to shift immediately. Laughter that previously defined our family was replaced by doubt. I was no longer merely his nephew. I was someone who needed to provide support and encouragement to those around me... even though I had no idea how to do so.

One afternoon, I sat next to him in the hospital. The room felt cool and was filled with a constant hum of machines. He appeared worn down and tired. When he noticed me, he offered me a familiar smile. We discussed typical subjects as if absolutely nothing had happened. At that point, I realized something very significant. Who he was never changed, regardless of what was physically occurring with him. He continued to be present. He continued to seek out the good. That particular moment taught me that living fully is not based on what is occurring in your life... It is based on perspective.

I witnessed my uncle experience levels of fatigue that could not be remedied by sleep. I witnessed levels of physical pain that no medication could cure. I witnessed the slow decline in his energy levels in subtle yet evident ways (in how he walked more slowly, in the pauses between words, and in times when his energy would fade). There were days when his illness became impossible to ignore.

But stronger than witnessing his struggles was how he faced them.

Even during the worst of his struggles, he still managed to smile. Not because everything was fine...but because he chose not to allow his suffering to dictate him. He still cared about others before himself. He still found reasons to laugh. He still made other people feel safe and comfortable, even when he was the one enduring the most pain. His strength lay in accepting his struggles rather than in hiding them. Living fully despite adversity is exactly what changed everything for me.

Since I view my uncle's life now from start to finish, I don't consider suffering as the ultimate measurement of his life. I do not consider cancer to be the defining characteristic of his life.

I see the way he lived before it.

I see the way he lived through it.

Most importantly...I see the way he never lost who he was.

I see joy within the memories he helped create.

I see courage in how he confronted cancer.

I see a man who lived each day fully until the end.

Therefore, when I look at his life as a whole...I know this with absolute certainty.

He was truly happy.

Not because his life was easy...but because it was full. Full of love, full of laughter, and full of experiences that mattered. His suffering did not eliminate his happiness.

My uncle gave me more than memories; he gave me a way to live.

Seeing him before and during illness taught me a lasting lesson: life should be lived boldly. He never waited for perfect chances; he said yes, found meaning, and lived with no regrets.

That is the lesson he left me.



I don't want to waste my life hesitating or living in fear. I don't want to look back and wonder what if. Cancer showed me that time is limited and nothing is promised. So, I choose to take risks, pursue opportunities, and live each day freely even amid uncertainty.

I think of him. And I make a choice differently.

I choose action.

I choose to take the risk.

I choose to live.

While cancer brought a level of sorrow into my life...it also provided clarity for me. It illustrated to me that the individuals we lose do not actually pass away; they help develop who we become today. His life ended; however, the lesson he imparted to me did not.

If I could tell others one thing, don't wait. Take risks. Be happy. Live fully.

Some lessons are best learned outside the classroom.

As I reflect on my uncle's life from start to finish...I finally understand.

He lived without regret.