



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

**Honorable Mention**

# Layla Croux

## *My Cancer Story*

As a child, it's easy to believe that tragedy is something distant, something that only happens to other people—other families, other kids—until it happens to you. I grew up thinking that tragedies were just bad stories you hear about on the news or online, not something you actually live through. I believed that karma was real, and that bad things only happened to bad people. But I guess I was wrong, and as it turns out, bad things can happen to good people too. I learned that the hard way when my little brother was diagnosed with cancer, a moment that changed my life in ways I never expected and forced me to grow up faster than I ever imagined.

I went from being scared of the word “hospital” to practically having one as a second home. Soon after my brother’s diagnosis, hospitals and doctors became a constant part of my family’s life. I remember the day he was admitted to CHOP (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia): November 4th, 2025. A day that will stick with my family forever. At first, I thought it was just a silly backache, that he was being dramatic and would be home in a few hours. But those couple of hours turned into a couple of days, which turned into a couple of weeks. Weeks full of confusion, fear, and not knowing. Weeks of hearing, “I understand how you feel” and “I’m sorry.” But you don’t. How could you? How could a normal, healthy 13-year-old boy go to the hospital

for a backache and come out with cancer? It didn't make sense. The doctors had thought he had pneumonia three times in one year, just a coincidence. Looking back, it's hard not to wonder how something so serious could have been missed. That was the moment everything changed for me. In the middle of all the fear and frustration, something inside me changed. I realized I didn't want another family to feel this lost, this confused, or this helpless. I want to study the human body – the anatomy, the bones, and the blood – and truly understand it. I want to grow up and be part of the solution, someone who can recognize the signs earlier and make a difference in people's lives when they need it most.

Spending so much time in the hospital allowed me to see a side of healthcare that most people never get to experience. I watched closely as the nurses and the care team treated my brother – not just physically, but emotionally too. They spoke to him with kindness and patience, even when he wasn't cooperative or was having a difficult day. They made him feel seen, not just as a patient, but as a kid going through something incredibly hard. They also supported my family, answering every question we asked – even when it felt like we asked more than twenty a day. They never made us feel like a burden, and that meant everything. As time went on, I became more involved in my brother's care than I ever imagined I would be. Unlike the rest of my family, I wasn't afraid to step into that role. I wanted to be part of his routine, part of what helped him get through each day. I learned how to carefully clean his PICC line, start his feeding tube, and make sure everything was done safely and correctly. At first, it felt overwhelming, but over time I grew more confident. I even began taking him on short walks around the hospital floors and at home, helping him feel some sense of normalcy in a life that had suddenly become anything but normal. Those small moments meant more than I can explain. Watching the nurses while also stepping into that role myself made me realize how much of a difference one person can make. When everything feels out of control, sometimes all it takes is a small act of care – a conversation, a smile, or simply being there – to bring comfort and hope. I saw firsthand how powerful



compassion can be, and it inspired me deeply. I want to be that person. I want to be someone who not only provides medical care, but also emotional support to patients and their families during the hardest moments of their lives. I believe that bad things happen for a reason and that God always has a plan, even when it's hard to understand in the moment. My brother's diagnosis brought my family closer together, guided me toward discovering my dream, and showed me how truly valuable time is. It changed my perspective on life and what really matters. Although this has been one of the most painful and difficult experiences I have ever faced, it has also shaped me into a stronger, more compassionate person.

It taught me to never take anyone for granted, to appreciate the small moments, and to find strength even in the darkest times. Most importantly, it inspired me to pursue a career in pediatric nursing. I want to provide the same comfort, care, and support to others that meant so much to me and my family. I want to be there for patients not just as a nurse, but as someone who truly understands what they are going through. If it wasn't for my brother, I wouldn't be writing this essay, and I wouldn't have found my purpose. His cancer journey changed my life, and because of him, I now know exactly who I want to become.