



13th Annual Ben Strauss

High School Essay Contest 2026

Honorable Mention

Lucy McGill

The Cancer Family

I was in 8th grade in May of 2025. I was trying out for the high school cheer team. I was practicing the dance moves in the kitchen and going over my cheers with my Aunt Lisa and Uncle Bob. I worked hard and made the team! I immediately went to tell my Granddad, who was on hospice. He was fighting lung cancer and lymphoma. It was hard to be so happy about making a high school team as a middle school student, while knowing Granddad wouldn't be around to see me in action. I lost him three days later.

Unfortunately, this wasn't new to me or my family. About two years before, I lost my Aunt Janet to metastatic breast cancer. She fought cancer for 9 years. My Granddad fought for 5 years. I can't remember a time where we were not "the cancer family." According to research, there are 336,000,000 people in the US. Each year, 2,000,000 people are diagnosed with cancer, which means .6% of the US population is diagnosed each year. It's not fair that it happened to my family, not once but twice. I was so young when my Aunt Janet was diagnosed, I don't remember her with her own hair, only wigs and really fancy earrings.

My Granddad and Aunt Janet would joke about being "cancer overachievers." My Aunt Janet fought breast cancer and beat it for a little bit. She started a cancer charity and had a baby.

But her cancer came back angry, and showed up in her bones, destroyed her hip and almost left her paralyzed. She fought on for another 3 years before she passed. My Granddad was just as strong. He was diagnosed with lymphoma and non-small cell lung cancer. His cancer kept coming back angry and he was one of the first reported cases of lung cancer mutating from non-small cell to small cell. I wish they found something else to overachieve in.

One thing that surprised me is the phrase “you have cancer” doesn’t just scare the person who is sick. It moves outward, like the waves when you throw pebbles in a pond. Cancer has caused a lot of waves for me and my family. It was hard for my mom because she helped with both of them, sometimes putting things at home or for herself aside. It was strange to see my mom, his daughter, be my Granddad’s caretaker. It impacted my Aunt Lori. She now spends her free time continuing Aunt Janet’s cancer charity so the message keeps going. It has been hard for me to see my Grandmom become quieter. She has spent over 12 years being a caretaker, so she now needs to figure out what she wants to. I know it can never be the same, but I want her to be happy again.

Their cancer fights also impacted me. I was very close with my Granddad and Aunt Janet. I miss the fist bumps and tough love talks with Granddad. My Granddad loved to drive, and sometimes as a treat he would take me out in his Corvette. I never told my mom this, but he drove so fast and was very happy doing it. Cancer took away those drives. I miss Aunt Janet having me over for movies and ice cream. Aunt Janet was determined to make sure I got to experience fun things; she brought me on the field before an Eagles game to hold the American Flag and I got to cheer on the team from the sidelines. I miss talking about that day with her. I saw how hard they fought, and it’s not fair that they are gone. Because of them, and seeing how much care and help they received, I want to become a nurse. I’ve learned that when someone is having the worst day, being able to listen and try to comfort them is a good thing.

I’ve been told grief comes in stages, and I guess I’m writing this from a place of anger. Also, I believe that there are only four stages of grief. I don’t think I will ever be able to accept the loss of my Granddad and Aunt Janet. I know I say “that’s not fair” a lot. And cancer isn’t fair; it takes away the people we love. Going through this has given me an appreciation for my family and friends. So if you take anything away from this angry essay, please spend time with



the people you love and let them know how you feel. You don't know when your time with them will run out.

My mom says that grief is what you feel when you love someone so much. Even though I'm sad, I'm lucky I got to love my Granddad and Aunt Janet so much and I'm a part of the Cancer Family.