



**13th Annual Ben Strauss
High School Essay Contest 2026**
Honorable Mention

**Madeline
Swenson**

*Interrupted Lessons-
Growing Up with Cancer*

Leukemia has affected my past, but has never defined my future. I was seven years old when I was initially diagnosed with B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Cancer disrupted much of my childhood, altering experiences that should have been carefree and joyful. I was initially diagnosed as a second-grade student in elementary school and later relapsed as a sixth-grade student in middle school. I spent more time navigating hospital rooms than classrooms. Leukemia changed the course of my educational experience during some of the most formative years of my life. While cancer reshaped my early learning experiences, it did not define who I am or who I am becoming.

My first diagnosis occurred as I was beginning second grade. Elementary school is an important time in a child's life. It is a time to meet new people, develop friendships, and develop

interpersonal relationships. These foundational skills are often learned through classroom experiences. The cancer treatment I had to endure caused me to have frequent absences from the classroom, limiting my opportunities to develop and grow alongside my peers. As a result, I had difficulty maintaining friendships and developing new ones. I struggled to connect with my peers, and my high rate of absenteeism caused the friends I had made to move on. They needed friends to play with on the playground at recess, and I was rarely there. Friends rotated throughout my treatment. Some faded away because I was not relevant to their daily lives, and others grew annoyed with me because I did not behave like a typical child. I talked fluently about hemoglobin, Leukemia, and chemotherapy. These were subjects far removed from most elementary school conversations. I could no longer relate to children my age. I did not talk about childhood crushes or discuss who was having the next birthday party. I was focused on other things, things most seven-year-olds would not be able to comprehend. Over time, I became increasingly isolated.

The challenges continued throughout my second diagnosis in the sixth grade at twelve years old. Another crucial stage in development. This time, along with the issues of making

Friends, I got behind academically. Middle school introduced more involved and complex coursework, and because I was frequently absent, I began to get behind on classwork. Despite having tutors and home-based instruction, the stress of keeping up in school never disappeared. Even now in my senior year of high school, I sometimes feel a little behind. Teachers bring up topics I am not familiar with, while the rest of my class can easily recall the information. I still struggle with making friends due to maturing very quickly and missing bonding experiences earlier in my educational journey. I often feel two steps ahead of my peers emotionally, but academically, I can feel two steps behind. I believe that with time, I will realign with my peers and grow more comfortable in both areas.

Along with academic and social challenges, I also faced physical obstacles that interfered with my school experience. Due to the amount of medication I was on, I developed something called Avascular Necrosis (AVN) in my shoulder and hip joints. Due to the deterioration in my joints, I walked with a limp and had limited mobility in my arms. I began to struggle with

navigating my way around the hallways and stairs in the school building. I was forced to use crutches for two years to assist me in the school hallways. Unlike the side effects I had experienced before, AVN is irreversible. The very medications that saved me left me with permanent challenges. I do not have and will never have a full range of motion in my arms. Thankfully, I was able to get hip replacements. My legs are now even, I have retired my crutches, and I no longer have to limp. I am grateful that through surgery and physical therapy, I have been able to overcome my physical challenges and continue to take strides in my educational journey.

Experiencing cancer as both a child and a teen gave me a unique and different perspective. It has given me an education in life. It has given me gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow. I appreciate my educational experiences. I am proud that I have developed socially, emotionally, and academically despite the challenges I have faced along the way.

I look forward to continuing my education at the college level in the fall. I want to pursue a career that will help children like myself. I am interested in pursuing a career in pharmacy, where I will work with the very medications that saved my life and have significantly influenced my health. Through my education, I will gain an understanding of the pharmaceuticals used to treat pediatric cancer. My goal is to actively prevent complications such as avascular necrosis (AVN) and other long-term damage resulting from cancer treatments. I will strive to ensure that children receive a brighter, healthier future with minimal side effects from their medications.

I look forward to using my experience to make a meaningful difference in the lives of children and teens facing cancer.