



**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
Higher Education Grant 2026  
2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

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## *Driven*

As a child, I always looked forward to growing up, going to prom, graduating, getting married, and even having a baby. All of those things are envisioned with your mom by your side, well, for most people at least. For me, things looked a little different. I had to learn to do things without her, and that is who I am. We celebrate the fact that she was in our lives not mourn the fact that she is no longer here. Her death had left a void in everyone who was in her life, a void that I was constantly struggling to fill. I will always struggle navigating the world without her guidance and support; however her absence has taught me that even though she is no longer here physically that does not mean her presence is not installed in every aspect of my life and who I am today.

Most kids learn lessons from their mom; I learned them from her and from her passing. At the age of two, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. For a little over one year we believed her cancer was gone; only to learn it had spread throughout her body. She had cancer off and on till she passed when I was just eight years old. By the time my mom passed she had



thousands of tumors, they were in every bone of her body, including a few in her skull. She had several tumors in her liver, ultimately taking her life. She not only had breast cancer the entirety of my childhood memories with her but her terminal diagnosis when I was 5 created a new level of fear, worry and uncertainty that hung over my household for the remainder of her life. Now in my household there is no longer fear, worry and uncertainty but more of an emptiness or a piece missing.

The last year of her life, as her eight year old daughter, I watched the pain and cancer slowly take over her body. She was not only in constant pain but life was slowly draining out of her eyes. The last few weeks when she was in the hospital she was completely unrecognizable, the only thing I remember is her constant smile and her eyes that had turned yellow from her liver's inability to remove waste and toxins from her body. It is in those moments, surrounded by the smell of the hospital room, that I will always remember, and the weight of her illness taking over her that I learned the true meaning of resilience and love. While my memory of her is slowly fading, I will never forget her smile that glowed across the hospital room every time someone she loved walked in. Watching friends and family come to visit her in the hospital she never stopped smiling, her smile cheering everyone in the room up instantly. She never wanted anyone to be sad, or feel bad for her. She always asked everyone about their life things like, how are their kids, and what they did that day. She wanted people to share life rather than talk about death.

My mother has become my life inspiration. Her approach to life, as well as the grace with which she handled the overwhelming challenges of a terminal cancer diagnosis has influenced many of the values that I hold dear today. Also, the loss of her physical presence in my life, beyond my eighth birthday, has undeniably shaped who I am. Every year on my birthday I undoubtedly feel a heavy weight on my shoulders reminding me that another birthday has gone by with the one person I dream to celebrate it with again. The absence of her on days like my birthday, her birthday, Mother's Day, Christmas, and even my father's birthday is an unshakable weight I will carry with me throughout my whole life.

She always found a way to play with me even through her sickness, I would pretend to be her doctor, or pretend to be her teacher. One of her favorite things in life was to watch my



creativity flow. While she was not able to do much sitting there watching me find ways to incorporate her into the little activities gave us valuable shared time together. When she was in immense pain she still found ways to make my childhood enjoyable and be there for me. It was more important to her that we made memories today than to worry about if she was going to be there to make more tomorrow. While she was down to her last two years we made the best out of it by going on many vacations like Florida, and Maine. Spending time with our family was her number one priority in her last couple years of life.

The strength my mother demonstrated, during her life, taught me the power of resilience, while her absence pushed me to develop skills that form resilience. Life can be extremely unpredictable; you must always be able to adapt to challenges thrown your way. When I watched her go in and out of the hospital, my mom's smile never faded, and the love she shared with others continually flowed. I witnessed the lift she felt through the joy, love, and connections she shared with those around her. I watched her beat cancer by refusing to allow the ever growing specter of death, to swallow the increasingly finite moments she had left to share with friends, family, my dad, my brother, and myself.

I learned the power of love. I learned that, even when all hope may be lost, there is still hope that your next moment may bring something beautiful. I learned to carry her spirit inside me. Her smile and loving touch guided me through my childhood often defined by her cancer, hospital food, four walls, frustration, anger, and an immense amount of tears. Every day I went to school, I found I could continue to be a breath of fresh air, and a source of positivity for all of my friends. I smiled not because I was happy, not because I was okay, but because I chose to celebrate her life. Every opportunity you have needs to be cherished and embraced. Every moment you have in life is precious and can change in an instant, live your life fully. A vital part of my life suddenly disappeared in the blink of an eye. Forever changing my perspective on life.

From a very young age, I had a very different outlook on life. When girls my age were worried about what their weekend plans were, I was saying goodbye to my mom. I was learning life lessons. Life lessons that some people spend their whole life not learning, at the age of eight. I was learning to grieve and to love. To others who know what I've been through, they may see me as fragile or watch what they say to me, but that is not who I am. I am emotionally



intelligent, and I help the people around me to be the same. I help others to feel and understand their feelings in hard situations.

My mother's spirit lives within me, shaping me more and more every day to be the best version of myself. While the pain of losing her will always be a part of me, the happiness of knowing her is more powerful than all. Losing her taught me to advocate for myself, have empathy for yourself and others around me, and it's okay to not be okay. Qualities I will carry with me throughout my life as I face new challenges. My experience motivated me to support others in their struggles and challenges. More than anything, I am driven, driven by the pride to make my mom proud, driven by determination to be the best version of myself, and most of all, driven to make younger me proud.

Experiencing cancer both in its immediate effects and long term effects, has shaped my family and sense of community in drastic ways. Facing a significant challenge together has put a bond on my family that will never break. Sharing this heartbreaking journey has made us celebrate each other's victories with immense joy. Beyond my immediate family our experience showed us what a community really is. Friends, neighbors, and Gilda's club members stepped up with meals, offers of help, and a hand for my dad.

In spite of the challenges life throws our way, humans possess an amazing capability for resilience and growth. The ability to find who you are among suffering is the true strength. Discovering your true strength and becoming stronger, wiser and more compassionate creating lives that are rich in depth, empathy and an appreciation for each moment. While many of my memories now consist of seeing her in the hospital bed every so often I remember something I experienced with her, she said to me, or she enjoyed doing it is in these moments that I feel her presence in my heart. The last thing she told my brother and I was to always love and let people in, let them love you.