



**13th Annual Ben Strauss
Middle School Essay Contest 2026**

Honorable Mention

Marie Croley

The Hopeful Light

Cancer is a word that I've heard my whole life. Whether it be about who has had it in the past or in the present. The first time I remember talking about cancer is when I was five, my mom told me about how my Baba who fought stage 3 ovarian cancer in 1989 and how it heavily impacted my mom's life as a child. Luckily Baba is standing here today and has been in remission for 35 years. I always wondered what it would be like to be that heavily impacted by cancer, and now I know. My Mommom was diagnosed with blood cancer in 2023. I remember feeling my stomach drop and the whole world was collapsing around me. The feeling of worry consumed me every day. I would then come to find out not only was my Mommom diagnosed, but my Big-Pop and Great Uncle Joe were also diagnosed. I started to feel like cancer was a mainstream subject in my family. It was suffocating knowing that I couldn't escape cancer.

I was prevented from seeing my mommom for almost an entire year. By the time I was able to see her, I could barely recognize her. She seemed so tired and weak. My mommom wore a head scarf after losing her hair. All I could think about was how she used to have long wavy blonde hair. My heart broke for her as I remembered a time where she told me about how she dyed her hair permanently blonde so she would



never have grey hairs and be blonde forever. Now that was taken from her. The spark in her eyes was dimmer, she had to rest much more often, and overall seemed more sad. I hated that I couldn't do anything about it.

The hatred I have for cancer is far too strong to be competed with. I watched how it affected my family and I knew I could do nothing to help prevent this cruel sickness from harming the people in my life. I felt so helpless as I watched the three go through ups, a lot of downs, and mostly change. My Big-Pop passed away recently while fighting against cancer. The was the biggest affect for me as I was always close to him. It felt like a piece of my heart was snatched away and I'll never have that piece back.

Eventually, I realized that drowning in sorrow wasn't doing my family any good. So, I chose to be more accepting of the new changes in my life. I chose to be there for my family instead of shutting down. I still struggle with accepting everything going on in my life. It feels like I'm just going through the motions without any differences. I sometimes feel envious of how many of my friends don't have to live with constant worry of cancer and what it is doing to people you love deeply. I've always wondered what it feels like to live a life where cancer doesn't come up every other sentence. I wonder what it's like to not be scared of getting cancer because of your family history. I wonder how I could ever explain this feeling to them. Even with the wonders and doubts, I am grateful that my family is filled with survivors. Survivors that fought tough battles, the ones that still are fighting tough battles too.