



**13<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss**

**Middle School Essay Contest 2026**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

# **Maura Quigley**

## ***Growing Beyond Cancer***

Cancer. One word, 6 letters that have changed my life forever. People all over the world have been affected by this disease, and I am one of them. My life changed forever before I even started kindergarten. I have a blur of a memory when I was five, sitting on the couch, and being told, “Daddy is sick. He has cancer.” Though I don’t remember much from this moment, it has changed me and everything I know.

After my Dad started his treatment, I was introduced to Gilda’s. My time at the clubhouse taught me what cancer was and how it affected my Dad. During those years, I also began to build a community of people who could understand my feelings, which I had a difficult time finding elsewhere. These early friendships have stuck with me through it all. I felt less anxious from these little moments and friendships.

Life was somewhat normal until yet another disease arose, COVID. My family and I were trapped in our house along with two sicknesses. Isolation became the hardest part for me. Though this chapter of my life was one of my hardest, I was able to grow closer to my family by spending more time together. I remember a time when I was in the backyard with my family, and



we had a water gun fight for hours. These are the types of small joys in life that got me through this difficult chapter.

Other times were not as great. My Dad was in the hospital frequently. There was one time that he was in the hospital over Thanksgiving. That year, cancer robbed my family of precious moments with my Dad. Moments like this always petrified me as it had me questioning what else could happen in the future. These are worries that I still carry with me today, even if they aren't life-threatening situations.

After a day at Camp Kids in 2022, I thought my parents were coming back from a regular doctor's appointment, but I was wrong. I knew that something was up when my Mom's face was red like she had just been crying, but I decided to ignore what this likely meant. After what felt like ages, we all sat down on the couch like once before. But this time it was much worse; there were no more treatments for my Dad. For a quick moment, it didn't click, but then it hit me that he was going to die. I always worried that he might die, but I never imagined that it would actually happen. Wasn't there supposed to be a miracle?

The following month, my Dad's condition deteriorated. Two days before he passed, everything kind of stopped for me. I knew that at this point, I stopped holding out for a miracle. That same day, it was just us in his room, and he gave me a heart locket that was engraved with "I love you, Always" and a picture of him. This gift represents so much more than his love for me. It was the most meaningful gift, but it also symbolizes the end. I still have trouble looking at it now. It broke me to accept his fate, but 2 days later, I had to. I got the news at my uncle's house on July 6, 2022. My life just changed forever. Everything after that is now a fuzzy memory of a funeral and burial, but I felt life had moved on without me. Despite all of the comfort from family, friends, and support groups, I had never felt more alone and miserable.

It is crazy to think that he passed three and a half years ago. Since then, I have learned to handle my grief, not let it define me, and grow from it. Since the diagnosis, to the death, and to now, I have become a different person. Even though cancer sucks and has ruined so much, I would not have become the person I am proud to be today without going through these experiences. Watching my dad go through cancer has made me more resilient, empathetic, and



understanding. When I have a hard day or something goes wrong, I know it's alright to fall or struggle, but I have learned from my Dad how to push through. I am able to get back up and keep going. Although cancer has made me lose so much, it has taught me many valuable skills that I will take with me forever.