



13th Annual Ben Strauss

Middle School Essay Contest 2026

Honorable Mention

Natalee Moten

A Lasting Battle

There are many things in life that you can come to expect. For instance, you might await an exceptional grade in a test you've rigorously studied for. Perhaps you anticipate a delectable treat after taking a whiff of a familiar, sweet scent. No one can prepare you to hear that your little sister, the one who assumes all dogs are "puppies" and sings obnoxious KidzBop songs, is going to be diagnosed with cancer.

As blurry as everything was that night, I remember tears. Lots of them. The simple words of my parents sharing the news shattered my entire world, like a fragile glass vase that had been knocked over by accident. An accident - surely that's what this was. Why her, of all people? My three-year-old sister, who barely even knew her favorite color yet? Suddenly, something that was so abstract and distant from me was a central component in my life.

The next few years of my life were a game of tug of war between time spent alone and visiting the hospital. It felt ridiculous at the time, the fact that I needed special permission to visit my own sister. When I couldn't, I had to be independent.



My mom was often unavailable as she dwelled at the hospital to watch over my sister on trips that ranged from days to months. I was frequently out of the loop. Who knew when they would finally return? Not me. All I could do was hope each trip would be their last- but it never was. Meanwhile, Dad's plate was occupied with work. This meant there was plenty I was forced to solve on my own.

Simple, every day, conveniences, such as requesting assistance on a complex math question, were a luxury for me. I guaranteed my capability in my schoolwork. This meant maintaining high-quality grades to keep them proud. I took on extra responsibilities, all the chores my sister couldn't. Another would be learning how to give her medicine through a tube. It was complicated at first, discerning the amounts of liquids to insert, coding the vague labels of the connected machines' buttons, and the struggle of not always having a helping hand to call on.

COVID-19 struck like a lightning bolt, electrifying the already shaky waters. I had been reminded time and time again; my sister getting sick was not an option. Just a simple cold was amplified for her, so the virus that was killing millions? Out of the question.

When I contracted COVID, it was as simple as this: I couldn't stay in the house. Every germ was an incredible risk to my sister's delicate immune system. All my parents could do was send me off to another state to stay with my grandmother.

My self-sufficiency had been kicked up a notch, not seeing my mother, father, or sister for an even greater amount of time. As welcoming a home my grandma offered, it just wasn't the same. Small issues popped up here and there, the kinds of concerns that don't appear until you're living with someone on a longer basis than ever before. A tantalizing misunderstanding of restrictive food choices, perhaps. The matter of staying in my grandmother's office as she busied herself with work, while I found ways to occupy myself during the hours of a typical 9-5 job.

When her cancer was treated with radiation, it seemed like a celebration was long overdue. Family, nurses, and doctors all gathered in the bright and child-appealing hallways of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Everyone applauded, whooped, and sang their praises.



The everlasting plaudits were only silenced by the gong she struck, a symbol of her treatment being completed.

At least, that's what I had assumed. Despite our wishes, the cancerous cells soon made a reappearance, and we went through the process all over again. After such a torturous journey, complete with hardships and a commemorating ending, we repeated it a second time.

And after that? A third relapse. It felt like we were trapped in a cycle. Each time we thought freedom was near, cancer reared its disgusting head to show the unfortunate truth. If her receiving cancer was undeserved itself, why would two relapses be any more justified?

As much as I am aggravated by her, I will never see my sister as anything less than the overcomer that she is. My sister has compellingly inspired me. She demonstrated age does not limit an individual's ability to prevail through unjust circumstances