



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

**Pranoy
Muthaiyan**

The Light Leukemia Couldn't Dim

(Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya)

Lead me from darkness to light.

These ancient Sanskrit words feel especially meaningful to me because they describe my cousin's journey. They are not a wish for a life without struggles, but a prayer for strength and hope during difficult times. When my cousin was diagnosed with leukemia, these words became the quiet belief that helped our family move forward.

Before cancer entered our lives, my cousin was a bright and creative child. She loved drawing and designing clothes inspired by traditional outfits like lehengas, kurtas, and colorful sarees. She would often add her own modern ideas to her sketches. Our family

gatherings were full of laughter, homemade food, and conversations that mixed English with our mother tongue. Life felt safe and happy.

Everything changed when she was diagnosed with leukemia. The news came suddenly and filled our family with fear. Hospital rooms replaced classrooms, and our conversations began to focus on medical tests and treatments. Time was no longer measured by school schedules, but by chemotherapy appointments and test results. Cancer affected not just my cousin, but our entire family.

Her parents, like mine, were immigrants from India living in the United States. Being far away from extended family made everything harder. Medical bills quickly added up, and Uncle missing work meant losing income. Even with insurance, money became a constant worry. Along with the emotional pain of seeing their daughter suffer, financial stress became another heavy burden. Stress and exhaustion led to arguments and silence between Uncle and Aunt. At times, it felt like the family might fall apart. In our culture, family unity is very important, and divorce is often seen as shameful. This belief made things difficult, but it also pushed them to stay strong and face the challenges together.

One of my precious memories from that time was when my cousin stayed with us while her parents tried to save money on rent. Our house became a place of comfort and happiness. We talked for hours, played in the snow, and built snowmen together. Inside, we colored and painted with watercolors, letting our creativity flow. At night we would curl up together watching Indian movies and eating dosa and laughing at dramatic scenes and singing along to songs we barely knew. During those moments, we forgot about hospitals and illness. All that mattered was being together.

Even though our relatives in India were far away, they supported us in powerful ways. Phone calls crossed time zones, and prayers were offered in temples. Grandparents lit

lamps, and family members fasted, believing that faith could help heal her. Though separated by distance, love connected us.

Food also became a way to show care. Simple meals like rice, dal, and soft rotis were prepared with her health in mind. Cooking became a way to comfort her when words were not enough.

Throughout her treatment, my cousin showed incredible courage. Cancer took away her hair and much of her childhood, but it never took away her creativity. Even in the hospital, she continued to sketch fashion designs. Designing became her escape and her way of staying hopeful.

The journey was not easy. There were setbacks and moments of fear. But slowly, the treatments began to work. Remission did not come all at once, but step by step. With each small improvement, our hope grew stronger.

Surviving cancer changed our family. It took years to recover emotionally and financially, but our priorities shifted. We learned that health, love, and being present for one another mattered more than anything else.

Years later, my cousin achieved something we once feared might never be possible. She was accepted into a prestigious university to study fashion design. Watching her follow her dream was incredibly emotional. The same hands that once held hospital tubes were now creating beautiful designs. Her past did not stop her: it made her stronger.

Today, her designs reflect her heritage mixed with modern ideas. She does not let cancer define her, but she carries her journey with pride. She is not just a survivor; she is a creator and a symbol of resilience.

Cancer taught our family lessons we will never forget. It showed us the strength of culture, faith, and togetherness. It also revealed the struggles immigrant families face



during times of crisis. Most importantly, it taught us that even in the darkest moments, light can be found.

Cancer changed our lives, but it did not defeat us. It taught us how to endure, how to hope, and how to move forward together. And so, I end with a prayer I now carry in my heart:

(Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu nirāmayāḥ)

May all be happy; may all be free from illness.