



**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
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3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

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## *Community Resilience After Cancer*

My experience with cancer has taught me the importance of living in the moment and ensuring that I appreciate every moment of good physical health myself and my loved ones have. I think people take for granted the little moments of normalcy in everyday life. Moments like those are ripped away with a cancer diagnosis. When I was 13 years old and my little sister was 8 years old, we were told our dad was diagnosed with stage 3b lung cancer and had approximately 18 months to live. I do not think either of us were able to properly comprehend the severity of this, and we both just felt pure panic. While this diagnosis was terrifying, what is even worse is the fact that this cancer was caught right before my dad would have had a death sentence. One day, my dad would have begun to cough up blood, and by then it would have been far too late. If he never got a blood clot from working in heating and air conditioning and was treated by a



hematologist who happened to be an oncologist, he would never have had a lung scan. This doctor insisted my dad needed a lung scan because he smoked for the majority of his life. During my dad's treatment, the same doctor's instincts were proven right yet again when my dad's cancer tested ALK positive from a test the doctor urged him to get. Instead of chemotherapy, his treatment became taking an ALK blocker. His cancer shrunk for 9 months, but then the size of his cancer reached a plateau. He had to begin chemotherapy and radiation, and it took months for his cancer to reach the point where an ALK blocker could be used to treat his cancer again. He entered remission, and just 2 and a half years later my dad started having episodes where he was unable to speak properly or read. We had just begun to feel a sense of normalcy, or what is left of normalcy after a cancer diagnosis. Whatever peace we had started to feel was ripped out from under us. My mom insisted he get a brain scan, which revealed that his lung cancer spread to his brain. He received brain radiation as treatment, and thanks to the ALK mutation, he was able to transition to an ALK blocker which crosses the blood brain barrier as treatment. He then began remission and is still in remission to this day.

Experiencing this at such a young age has shown me that time with our loved ones is the most important thing in life. No one expects to have poor physical health or less time with their loved ones, and knowing the possibility is always present has given me a different outlook on life. As much as life gets stressful and can feel overwhelming, time is the only currency that actually matters. People always long for more time with loved ones, in a certain place, or during a certain period of their lives. In order to properly appreciate what we have, the best thing to do is live in the moment and be present. Putting value into the here and now is how we can make the most of the time we have because that time is never guaranteed.

Cancer helped me realize that shared experiences shape communities and families and bring them closer together. When my dad received his cancer diagnosis, my family did not know of any support groups or resources. Thankfully, one of my good friends from classes and marching band connected us to Gilda's Club and Camp Kesem. Entering these spaces and knowing that every single person in the room understood what I was currently going through



made me feel comfortable so quickly. Cancer had taken away our sense of peace, but it gave us new connections and strengthened old ones, and these relationships will last a lifetime. Gilda's Club was our first experience with new support for my dad's cancer, and while my dad was hesitant at first, he is still actively participating weekly to this day through tutoring. My sister and I were in the children support group while our parents were in the Living with Cancer Support Group. It helped my sister and I to connect with others experiencing exactly what we are, or with those who have already been through it. My parents were able to share their persistent anxieties with others who completely understood, and people sharing their stories encouraged my dad to share his as well. The connections from these support groups have only grown stronger as time has passed. Those who overcame their cancer still remain friends of my parents, and the spouses of those who sadly passed away are still friends of my parents as well. My sister regularly talks to friends she has made at Gilda's Club. I still regularly talk to my friend who introduced us to this very helpful support so many years ago. This community is still able to consistently connect through so many different events, such as events near every major holiday, like turkey bingo, easter egg hunts, and breakfast with Santa. My sister still participates in summer camp and looks forward to this every year.

Gilda's Club helped me realize how much joy I get from working with children during their summer camp. The older kids were volunteers to help the younger children with camp activities. Watching kids so much younger than me still be happy and upbeat constantly after experiencing cancer in their family showed me just how resilient people can be. These kids always looked forward to camp and made activities that seemed silly so fun for all of the counselors. Organizing activities as a team helped me get closer to the other volunteers, including my friend's siblings. My friend who introduced me to Gilda's Club had previously worked at the camp, so she had more to do than new volunteers. Her siblings were also new, so I was able to spend more time with them than I ever had before. Getting closer to her sibling made me feel closer to her as well, and I am very grateful to still have her and her sibling in my life



now. I do not know how my family would have gotten through my dad's cancer without their family's constant unwavering support.

Camp Kesem has also provided my family with sustained support. Every summer, children who have parents with cancer or lost a parent to cancer have the opportunity to go to a YMCA camp for a week led by college students. I participated every summer until I aged out of it at 18, and my sister has as well. While Gilda's Club gave us support consistently throughout the year, Camp Kesem gave us support while also giving us an escape from our everyday lives. Camp Kesem felt like a vacation, and being surrounded by so much nature and having isolation from the outside world gave every child a much needed break. Every year it took place in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania, so there were always walking trails, lake fronts, and plenty of natural beauty. We were all able to do things we normally did not have easy access to, like kayaking, swimming, and plenty of campfires. As I got older, I was given more responsibility and was able to assist the younger kids similarly to how I did at Gilda's Club Summer camp. Working with children in this way reinforced what Gilda's Club had already shown me: children are very important to me and I want to create a better world for them to thrive in in the future. Along with this magical week once a year, Kesem has some smaller events throughout the year to maintain the connections between children, parents, and counselors alike.

Time is so important, and this experience has helped me grow and discover a passion that I plan to make my career. My goal in life is to create better health for as many people as I can, and I will do this through working in public health. I obtained a Bachelor of Science from The University of Delaware in Biological Sciences with a minor in Genetic Counseling. I am currently working on my Master of Public Health in Community Health and Prevention with a minor in Maternal and Child Health from Drexel University. I hope to specifically work to help communities, specifically children, maintain proper health. Being able to work to ensure children have access to proper care, such as through vaccination, would be so fulfilling, and this passion arose from my experience with children at Gilda's Club. Protecting the optimism of kids by ensuring they have proper physical health will allow a new generation to love, grow, and most



importantly, live. As much as cancer has taken from my family, it has somehow given us so much. New connections we cherish every day would never have occurred without my dad's diagnosis. My perception on how communities can be created and strengthened is forever altered by cancer. The passion I have for bettering the health of communities as whole has arisen from such a stressful period of my life. Changing this pain into something positive will help me make the world better for those who will be here after me.