



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

2nd Place

Toren Mehta

The Hardest Fight, The Strongest Me

The date was Monday October 17th, 2022 when I started to feel fatigued with neck pain. Little did I know that these were the first signs that my life was about to change. As the days went on, the symptoms remained and on Thursday after calling my pediatrician's office, I was told to go straight to the emergency room! At that time, I had never been to an emergency room so I was very nervous and scared. When my dad and I got there they eventually took me in to do lab tests. This was my first blood draw with many to come. For 30 minutes me and my dad were just waiting and thinking about what could be happening and then the doctor came in and said the words that nobody wants to hear... YOU HAVE CANCER!

Once I heard that I was terrified. The only thing I really knew about cancer was that I lost my grandmother to it. I felt scared and questioned what would happen to me. I didn't know if this would be for a month, a year or even a decade. I didn't have much time to think before I was transported to CHOP in an ambulance. The next few days were difficult. I felt very sick and tired, trapped in a room, and felt like I was losing control of my life. I had to get multiple procedures which included putting a port into my chest. Despite feeling sick and scared, one thing that helped me more than I can ever express was all the support I received from family, friends, doctors, teachers, and many



more. I remember one day when I was in the hospital several of the staff at my school (including my principal and teacher) had a video call with me. That made me feel comfortable and made me think that I might be able to fit in at school. On November 1st I was finally able to go home after nearly 2 weeks.

Although I was home, the next phase was very hard for me. Not being able to go to school with my friends and unable to play sports had me feeling isolated. My friends could not relate to what I was going through. On top of these feelings, I had to take medicines every day that made me feel worse not better. Furthermore, I had to go in to the clinic at least 3 times a week in those first few months, receive about 20 spinal taps, and be hospitalized at least five more times. I also started experiencing changes such as losing hair, wearing leg braces to support my weak legs, mood changes and feelings of constant hunger. I knew that I just had to be strong and take it day by day. Receiving cards from friends, teammates, and classmates with kind notes such as "I hope you feel better" and "you are very brave" was motivating.

After 3 months I was on to the next stage of chemo which was a much better phase. I was taking fewer medicines and finally starting to feel like my normal self again. Every day was getting easier and I was starting to slowly get my strength back. The final phase of treatment was a breeze compared to what I had been through. During this time, I accomplished the two biggest goals for many cancer patients. The first was in July, 2024 when I finally got my port removed. This allowed me to play sports again for the first time in 2 years. The second came in February of 2025 when I got to "ring the bell" in front of my family and oncology team! This major milestone signified the end of treatment and my defeat of cancer after a long 2.5 year journey!



My victory over leukemia was achieved in part due to an incredible community. Additionally, I was blessed to interact with many different organizations devoted to helping families affected by cancer. The experiences these organizations offered made me feel part of a team again and provided so much joy for me and my family. They helped shape me into the strong and brave person I am today. My advice to any kid, parent, or supporter going through an experience with cancer is to stay strong, be positive and eventually your moment will come. Never give up and keep fighting!