

CONTENTS

Sounds Like Teen Spirit

Teenagers might not share their true feelings with Mom and Dad after a parent's cancer diagnosis. But in an essay contest run by Gilda's Club Seattle for the past several years, they have poured out raw, complicated, and inspiring emotions. Here are excerpts:

I Googled the word cancer for days, checked it out on health sites, but still I don't have a clear understanding of what it is. The dictionary tells me: a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body. But I think cancer has many more meanings than the counts of cells in your body. Cancer means the number of soccer games you'll actually be able to attend this year, how many nights you'll be up with me helping me fix our damn printer for a school project due the next day yet again, or even how many more lectures I'll receive from you this year about what's right and what's wrong.

—*Alexandra Loistl, 15, whose mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer in 2008 and is now "recovering and feeling good."*

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I knew I was not the perfect daughter. To my loving parents who had provided my sister and me with nothing but the best, I felt as if I had been nothing more than the eldest daughter who is apathetic, sophomoric, and ignorant. The truth is, that's not who I really am. I was just frustrated with them because I don't see either one of them showing any empathy towards what I'm going through as a teenager. I made a decision ... I would prove to my mother that I'm a different daughter than what she had previously seen. I would show her that I could be caring and would support her no matter what.

—*Danielle Bayas, 17, reflects on her reaction when she learned that her mother had stage 1 uterine cancer. Today, she says, her mother is "healthier than ever."*

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I feel very fortunate to have been able to control and let go of my [bottled emotion] in the form of athletics, music, and books. Inside the lines and inside the pages were my refuge. I would escape into my headphones and the wash of distortion from my guitar. It was in these places where I felt I was free from the complexities and the hurt of cancer. At the time I did not realize that I never really did escape from cancer. I was only able to redirect it into a more positive place. I could express my confusion on my guitar. I could take out my anger on a ball, and I had a comforting voice who knew some of my pain in my headphones.

—*Andrew Marchione, 19, recalls how he coped during his mother's 2006 cancer ordeal.*

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What the future holds, I couldn't tell you. No one knows why these things happen. How come my family? I can't even pretend to know. All that I can say with one simple sentence is my life was re-defined; and I am forever a stronger person because of it.

—*Marlene Pierce, 16, on her father's cancer diagnosis in 2007.*

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I'm absolutely terrified that as I get older, I will start to forget [my father], and remember his sickness instead. Cancer is a debilitating, humiliating, all-destructive disease—but he handled it with exceptional grace and dignity. It would be frighteningly easy to remember only the lingering anticipatory grief of his death, rather than his patience, calm, and inner peace. But I'm hopeful that his passion for the world is one face of his perspective that he's been able to pass on through his life, not his death.

—*Katie Nelson, 19, adapted from the eulogy she gave when her father died of cancer in 2007.*

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At first, I didn't want my friends to know. I didn't want to have constant attention and sympathy from people who didn't know what I was dealing with. I didn't want my friends to ask me how I was feeling, or if I needed anything. Most of all, I didn't want people to tell me they were sorry, because I didn't know how to respond. I still don't.

—*Morgan Smuck's father died of leukemia in 2005. Smuck, now 19, won the Gilda's Club essay contest in 2008.*