

I felt guilty for writing this, because I was about to use my mother's death for my own personal benefit of a scholarship. It's been twelve years since my mother died from breast cancer. I have become desensitized by the thought of it (some of the time). It took my father two days to tell me "Mommy's with all the little angels" and four years for me to stop crying on Mother's Day, her birthday, and Christmas.

After two years my father sent me to live in Queens with his sister and her family. He felt that he was only able to raise my older brothers, but he could not raise a girl. Instead of having me stay with one of my three aunts who lived literally blocks from where I lived in the Bronx, he sent me to live with his strict and generally harsh sister in Queens. This angered my mother's family and was very upsetting to me. She was not a warm or loving person, in fact she was quite angry and unwelcoming.

Since, I was seven, I was subjected to constant belittling in her strict Guyanese household. To no one's surprise, I was conflicted when my aunt got sick when I was in seventh grade. By 2014, we found out she had breast cancer. When my mother was sick, I had no idea what was going on. When my aunt fell ill, it was like I received the "parent with cancer experience" I previously missed out on. Between late night hospital trips, entering high school, and an increase in household responsibilities, I couldn't handle it. I thought everything in my life was destined to become cancerous. I had an irrational fear that I brought cancer to everything around me.

I'm seventeen now and I realized that at the time, I was too young to actually be day to day affected by my mom's death, yet I faced the repercussions of her death instead. I felt like a burden. It didn't help that adults would bring her up at awkward times, like at award ceremonies in, what I now realize, was an attempt to be comforting... "Your mom would be so proud".

Instead, it upset me. So I made a conscience effort to detach anything I did, away from her to try to avoid the grieving process or the moments of self-pity when I felt that everyone had it so much better or thinking about my own mortality with these strong breast cancer genes.

So why am I writing about her now? Am I not using her death to gain leverage in life? All of these thoughts went through my head. Until I stopped and realized that it is not immoral to share my story even if it is for my benefit. As I get older, experience more and heal, I believe that my life would only become “cancerous” if I didn’t put in an effort. When I realized this, I sat down and wrote this essay. Now I am phenomenally happy that I shared this story. I know that I’m not alone and that there are many who have similar and worse situations. I hope that I can help someone else in the future if they are struggling.

I will be the first person in my family to go to college and I could really use the financial help. Especially since my father is a much older man now, 72 years old, and has been retired since 2017. I plan to keep costs down by going to a 4-year Cuny college, but as you know, college costs are expensive. Thank you for considering me for the Diane Gerstner Memorial Scholarship and I appreciate your time.

Diane Gerstner Memorial Scholarship

Diane Gerstner was a teacher's aide in Mineola School District and had two sons, who graduated Mineola High School. She was active in the community, loved by peers, friends and family. She battled breast cancer for 4 years but lost the battle and passed away in 2008. In her name and for the other's in our family who have suffered from this dreaded disease, we operate a breast cancer charity called We're Fighting Back, Inc.

Requirements for Scholarship:

- Essay about how you have been affected by breast cancer in some way.
- You must be going into college.

Please fill out the form below and write a little bit about yourself, how you have been affected and any efforts you have made to help the fight against breast cancer.

Any questions please email James Gerstner at jfg97@msn.com or call me at (516)582-6672.

Name Michael Conway date of birth 05/31/2000

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College Attending Adelphi University



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Return to the Main Office by March 2nd

February 27, 2018

My name is Michael Conway. I am the youngest of four kids. I grew up in Mineola, but moved to North Carolina from 2006 to 2010 and since then I've been living in Williston Park. My dad is retired from the NYPD and my mom is self-employed. My oldest brother is getting his Master's in education at Adelphi University, my other brother is a New York City police officer and my sister is in her second year of college.

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer last November during her annual mammography. She had to go through a lot of testing before undergoing surgery. After the surgery, she had to undergo radiation five days a week for five weeks. It's recommended that she take medication possibly in the near future to prevent a reoccurrence.

When I found out, knowing what I know about cancer(s), I was nervous that my mother could die from it, but luckily they found it in time and it was localized to one area and with surgery she was going to be okay. She still has to go follow exams twice a year. I am still worried it could come back again. This is something you always worry about when it's somebody you love.

Cancer, no matter what stage, is devastating to those going through it and their loved ones. I hope someday they find a cure for all cancers.

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College Attending Not sure yet



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Return to the Main Office by March 2nd

Brianna Caroleo

Diane Gerstner Memorial Scholarship

Hi, I'm Brianna Caroleo. I'm 18 years old and the youngest of four kids in my family. Two of my siblings went to Mineola, and we've all been involved in the district ever since. My mother gave birth to me at age 42, and at age 47 she received the news that she had breast cancer. I was only in Kindergarten, so I wasn't very aware of what was going on. All I knew is that my mom didn't have hair anymore. As I grew up I was told more about it, and I would keep asking questions. I knew that cancer was a terrible thing, but I obviously did not understand the full extent of it. If you were to ask the younger me, I would probably say that my mom was sick for a little bit, but then she got better. The way I see it now is that I'm so fortunate to still have my best friend by my side. She went through six months of radiation and chemotherapy, and then 5 years of medication. I still ask questions about it, like how did she feel and was it painful and, mainly, how scared she was. They were all answered the way you'd expect; she felt run down, it was exhausting, and yes, she was very scared. Even now just thinking about it I get scared. Learning about this dreaded disease and seeing how many people are affected all over the world makes me want to help out. I've done a breast cancer walk before, but I definitely want to get more involved for this cause. Everyone should learn about this problem so that we can ban together and finally find a solution. The only way we'll keep finding more effective treatments is if we support the cause as a whole.

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College Attending Quinnipiac University



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Diane Gerstner Memorial Scholarship

My life changed two years ago on Christmas Day, when my mom and grandma returned home from a doctors appointment and told my family that my grandma had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I had a whirlwind of thoughts, and I was terrified of losing her. My sister and I had never dealt with something like this before, and we didn't even know what to think. Over the next few months, we visited many breast surgeons and oncologists. I went along for moral support, because my grandma was typically a very strong and independent woman, but this was slowing her down. She used to go to work, clean her whole house, and make dinner from scratch every night. I knew that there were suddenly going to be major changes in her life.

After several appointments and opinions, the decision for surgery was made and scheduled for April. A few days before the surgery, we settled my grandma into our house. We boosted her confidence and prepared her mentally, because that's all that we could do at the time. The idea of surgery was so unknown and frightening to me, but I wanted to lift her spirits in any way that I could. The day of her surgery came and although there were only cancer cells present in one of her breasts, she made the brave choice to undergo a double mastectomy. After her surgery, my grandma stayed with us to recover for about two weeks. It was heartbreaking to see how fragile and needy she had become. Her diet changed, and she had become both mentally and physically weak. I helped her with seemingly easy, basic things everyday like eating, getting dressed and going to the bathroom. She had visitors and therapists at our house, and it was interesting to see how the health professionals like nurses, occupational therapists, and psychologists were able to help her so much. She loved spending her days chatting on the phone with her friends and watching funny YouTube videos with me. It warmed my heart to see her slowly recovering and healing both physically and emotionally. Even our dog, Millie, gave her plenty of emotional support, company, and comforted her.

Every member of my family gave her the support that she needed during this tough experience in her life. We helped her to regain her strength, nursed her back to good health, and got her back on her feet. After some time, she finally went back home to be with my grandpa,

who missed her terribly! Now when I look back two years later, I cannot believe how far she has come. She is healthy again and I admire her for being so strong, brave, and fearless. She now even goes to an Indian senior center daily with my grandpa, where she gets to enjoy the company of her friends and partake in fun activities and events. It truly feels like she got a second chance at life!

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College Attending Not yet decided



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Ever since I was a little girl I always wondered why my grandma was never around. I would come up with different excuses to convince myself that she had left for a reason. Maybe she was on a long vacation. Maybe she was living with a friend. Maybe she was occupied with work. Maybe, maybe, maybe. I never had the heart to confront my parents about it until I was well into middle school and the conversation went a little like this.

"Mom, why is grandma never here? I always think maybe one day she'll just walk through the door."

"Oh, I wish she would walk through the door. I'm afraid breast cancer got the best of her."

My mom got teary explaining to me that my grandma was an extraordinary woman that left the earth too young. She was a woman with great integrity and spirit who valued her family above all else. She unfortunately got sick when my mother was only a teenager and spent most of her time in and out of the hospital. My mother described the frequent visits with her siblings and the different things they would say to keep my grandma's mind off her sickness. They would make up stories about their day and tell ridiculous stories about my grandfather's auto shop. They tried to include her in almost everything they did, but it was a nearly impossible task when they only saw her once a day. Unfortunately, she passed away when my mother was only 16 so she was never able to see my mother married with a child.

Because I was never able to meet my grandmother, I have always had this curiosity to know who she truly was and how she would fit into my life today. I always think about what kind of relationship we would have had and whether or not I would have been the favorite grandchild.

Breast cancer took a woman who was far too exceptional off this earth at an unprecedented time leaving my family with a gaping hole. She was clearly a woman who left an impact to those she surrounded and even affected her future family for the better. If only I could have met the woman who raised my mother to be the most genuine, hard-working, and kind hearted individual I have ever met, even if it would only be to thank her. Breast cancer has left me with many "What if?" questions and all I can do is sit here and let time do the healing.