

Faces of Hope



The Story of My Cancer Journey

The initial symptoms were relatively mild. Some blood in my stool. Hmm. That isn't right. We scheduled an appointment with my GP and she confirmed that, yes, there was some blood there. We then scheduled my first colonoscopy for later that week. Chances of it being serious were pretty slim. I was relatively young (43), healthy and in the prime of life. Probably some sort of ulcer related to the stress of starting a new business. On the outside chance it was cancer, surely it would be stage I which is treatable and has an excellent long term prognosis. After the colonoscopy, our doc came in the recovery room and informed my wife and I that he found a tumor where my large & small intestine met. I had cancer.

Even from the very beginning, I decided that life would go on. We had planned to meet socially with friends that evening and I didn't see any reason to cancel. If anything, enjoying time with friends & family took on renewed importance.

We immediately scheduled surgery. Still thinking it was most likely stage I, we were very hopeful of a relatively "simple" solution to our situation. After the operation, the surgeon came into my room, with my family there, and told us that the cancer had spread throughout my abdomen. Although they removed the primary tumor, the rest was more or less inoperable because of its proximity to other vital organs. I had advanced stage IV colon cancer. Dang.

A couple days after the surgery, while I was still recovering in the hospital, I walked down the hall to a small resource room with a computer and Googled "survival rates" for stage IV colon cancer. The results were pretty grim. Not 50%. Not 10%. Not 2%. The 5-year survival rate for what I had was "N/A". Not applicable. Dang, Dang.

My wife & I immediately started planning. Where was the research happening? What chemo was available? Who were the absolute best specialists for my type of cancer? We ended up seeing a colon cancer specialist and they prescribed a brand new chemo that had just been approved the month before. He said there wasn't a "cure", but this was the best hope for lengthening my survival. We did a full round of chemo. Nausea, numbness in the hands/feet, cold sensitivity, weight loss (but no hair loss!). It worked pretty well and got my "CEA" numbers (level of cancer activity in my body) down to "normal" levels.

Wow! Was that it? Was I done?? A few months later, my CEA levels started going back up. The cancer was still there. Dang, Dang, Dang. Since then, we've been on a bit of a see saw with Medicine vs. Cancer. Another round of chemo; radiation; different chemo combo; another chemo combo; another round of radiation; another chemo combination; not to mention all the CT scans, PET scans, MRI scans, blood tests and miscellaneous probing. Whew. Makes me tired just writing about it.

Throughout it all, my wife & I were very focused on "getting it right". For every decision, we focused on stacking the odds on our side. We got the best care available. We got second opinions. We watched for side effects and dealt with them. We actively participated in getting me more healthy.

Like it or not, YOU are the one primarily responsible for your care. No one (including your doctor) has as much at stake as you do, so it's best to be aware of all your options and make informed decisions.

Currently, I'm still in active treatment, using a "chemo-lite" that doesn't have huge side effects. I work full-time running a successful web design business. I'm an active paddler and coach on a local dragon boat team. This disease does not have to halt you (although chemo day is a nap day). It has been almost 5 years since that first diagnosis. Take THAT "Non Applicable"! We're not out of the woods, and the chemo does take its toll, but we are hopeful that new treatments will one day turn the tide for folks like me and "there is no cure" will be something no one will have to hear ever again.

Even though my diagnosis is less than clear, life goes on. Getting cancer will REALLY make you appreciate what you have. My survivor buddies on the dragon boat team are some of the most fun-loving, life affirming bunch you could ever meet. ALL of us will one day move on to another plane of existence. Appreciate today.

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