When Cancer Strikes

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Inspirational essay about cancer with personal stories.

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James â Rhioâ Oâ Connor is truly an inspiration to any individual who has been given a cancer diagnosis. When told he had mesothelioma, an aggressive form of an asbestos-related cancer, and had only a year to live, he did not give up. He did not accept the prognosis as unchangeable. He educated himself in ways that changed the course of his disease and outcome. I believe prognosis is dependent on being informed and attitude. An informed person can explore options and take an important, active role in deciding the course of treatment. Being more involved in understanding and decision making fosters a sense of determination, and it was that determination that allowed Rhio Oâ Connor to live well beyond his projected prognosis (www.survivingmesothelioma.com) .

A cancer diagnosis is about as scary as it gets. I have learned over the years, however, it is not a death sentence. We have come such a long way in treating cancer and saving lives that it is important for people to understand the importance of educating themselves and maintaining a positive attitude.

Cancer seems to be everywhere, but there is so much more that is known today about cancer than years ago. Perhaps cancer was as prevalent back then, but we just didnâ t have the diagnostic tools that we have now, and so we couldnâ t properly identify the condition.

When my Grandfather was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, on March 26, 1997, at the age of 62, I was very young. I can remember our family falling apart emotionally at the news that it had spread to his lymph nodes. While I didnâ t understand any of it back then, I can recall being frightened at the thought that something was wrong with Grandpa and worried that he might not be alright. Like most grandchildren, I adored my Grandfather and I also lived with my grandparents as they had legal custody of me. With my parents in crisis, the thought of losing one or both of my grandparents was terrifying.

Later I came to realize that cancer afflicts almost every family and affects every family in some way. I donâ t think any of us realized at the time that there was a long journey ahead. Our family has been blessed because my Grandfather is still here with us today, 15 years later, at the age of 77. He retired from his full time job and continues to work today part time for the village in which we live. I believe he was given the gift of life because he followed a balanced treatment plan, kept a good outlook and we all educated ourselves. He did not get depressed or let it consume his life. I can recall when my Grandmother asked him if he was okay after the doctor gave us the bad news; he told my Grandmother that he was still the same person as before the diagnosis.

I am so proud of my Grandfather for being brave and following the course of treatment chosen. Sometimes I hear about elderly people that arenâ t able to make informed decisions and it saddens me. And now, at age 19, what I find most profound is that over the years, our family and community has lost many members who, at the time of my Grandfatherâ s diagnosis, were healthy individuals who had expressed their sincerely sympathy and concern for my Grandfatherâ s well-being and offered their support. Each and every one of these individuals shared our fears and concerns that my Grandfather might succumb to his illness and we would lose him sooner rather than later. They offered emotional support, comfort and never ending expressions of care and prayer.

It gives people a whole new perspective on life when cancer strikes, not only for the patient, but for the entire family and community. Being so focused on my Grandfatherâ s condition and treatment, it never occurred to me that one by one we would begin to lose healthier members of our family and the community around us,

as they became ill.

Looking back, it was my Grandfather that everyone was worried about. It was my Grandfather who was at risk, yet, with a 60% 5 year survival rate; he continued on and survived beyond others who were not in any risk categories at the time. What this has taught me about life is that we can not predict or assume anything. We cannot give up hope on those with cancer diagnoses, just as we cannot go through life thinking that we canâ t lose others who have not been diagnosed with cancer or are not ill at the moment.

I can remember sitting in church at each funeral for another lost loved one, and thinking about how the deceased had offered their kind compassion when my Grandfather was diagnosed, and here I was now offering my condolences to their family. The whole idea that my Grandfather has survived beyond numerous others who were there to share our deep pain back in 1997 and throughout the years, while they enjoyed good health has made me look at life very differently.

Even though I know that every person is not the same, I know now that we should never attempt to predict the path of any disease, including cancer. Along the way, other men my Grandfatherâ s age and younger were also diagnosed with prostate cancer. I watched as some died although their cancer was said to be â containedâ to the prostate meaning that their prognosis was better than my Grandfatherâ s â advancedâ cancer.

And as difficult as this is to say, and as improper as it may sound, whenever we would hear about another person diagnosed with prostate cancer, I would be relieved in a sense that my Grandfather was not alone. Although he never discussed his feelings about the cancer, I thought that he might have felt alone at times and hearing about it from someone local or famous might give him a sense of not being in the cancer battle alone. I didnâ t want my Grandfather to ever feel alone. I wanted him to know that others shared and understood his struggle.

I remember hoping when Colin Powell, Joe Torre and Rudy Giuliani were diagnosed with prostate cancer that it would be talked about more and information would become more readily available and it was. I also remember feeling bad that I was glad in a way that my Grandfather was not alone and he was actually in the company of famous people who were well respected. Because men donâ t usually discuss such personal issues, I thought maybe having well-known people in the fight might open the doors of knowledge and reduce or eliminate the embarrassment.

Our family has been very fortunate and has gained patience and love in ways that might not otherwise have been attained. We always loved my Grandfather and each other, but when cancer came knocking, it took everything to another level.

If I were diagnosed with cancer, like Rhio Oâ Connor and my Grandfather, I would focus on educating myself so that I would understand what I was facing, the options available to me and how I needed to alter my lifestyle to improve my chances of survival.

While some cancers have a genetic component, lifestyle and the environment are responsible for many other cancers. I believe environmental factors that increase our risk of developing cancers include dangerous industrial particles like asbestos, volatile organic compounds like those found in paint, and food and beverage additives and preservatives like nitrates, nitrites, sulfites and human growth hormones.

Being able to make the best decisions would include reading current books, articles and information on reliable internet sources (www.cancermonthly.com) , reviewing studies and meta analysis, obtaining information from researchers and recognized hospitals, universities and organizations, participating in support groups and discussing personal experiences with patients.

I would listen and consider traditional treatment options, but would supplement those options with considering non-traditional ones. I would research organic and holistic approaches, along with nutritional supplements. I would inquire about clinical trials taking place and consider experimental treatment if my condition was deteriorating and I was not able to stop the cancer from progressing. I would also seek help through mental and physical stress relieving techniques, because I believe that what goes on in the mind is reflected in the body. I also believe it is important to find a spiritual place to reflect, help keep things in perspective and maintain an optimistic outlook.

My decisions would be based, not only on the likelihood of success, but knowing how I might react to a certain form of treatment. Unfortunately, many cancer patients are lost to the treatment rather than the disease. Studying and researching my diagnosis would not only help tremendously in my understanding of the condition and the road that lies ahead, but would also keep me busy doing something positive about the situation instead of dwelling on the negative.

And finally, I would become an advocate and lobby both my state representatives and members of congress to provide additional funding for further research and treatment to help protect those yet to be diagnosed.

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