

Daddy's little girl

GROWS



When I asked my dad to start writing down his thoughts on paper, as he battles lung cancer, I felt it would help him get his feelings out. Men don't do that too well, we know. I figured for him it was a better choice as opposed to a live conversation across the table. When life throws those fast curve balls I continually touch upon amongst my Pub Pages, sometimes it's difficult to face those hard conversations head on. I knew that this would not be just for me, but also for him. His notes ended up becoming a letter to the family, he now updates as his journey unfolds. I ache inside—a sort of pain that makes me wonder why life has to have these moments at all. When I think of my dad's worries and concerns I'm left in amazement. Deep down, after the obvious “who would take care of my two handful-terrible-awful-loveable-loyal-to-me-only dogs,” and concern for my mom's well-being, of course, I know his worst fear is the potential of leaving me to deal with life on this earth without him. He has been my daily phone call, my personal shrink and my best pal for many years now. He worries incessantly about me as I tackle the “sandwich generation” I have joined, with all my might.

The pen is really quite cathartic, as I've learned through the years writing Pub Pages. My intent was to save this material until the May/June's issue (Father's Day seemed appropriate), but I just couldn't wait. If my instincts are right, many readers will benefit from his story. The bond between fathers and daughters is very special. G-d knows that I would not be half the woman I am today without his love, guidance and support every step of the way. Even when I made some poor decisions, okay...some really dreadful decisions, against my father's grain, he still stood right by me. His love was/is unconditional. This has been a brightly shining beacon throughout my entire life. Dad, happy Father's Day...a bit early. You have taught me that celebrating our unique bond just once a year is ludicrous—each day with you in my life is a blessing. If I didn't say it enough when I was younger, I love you. Now that I'm grown up and a new mom again, I need you more now than when I was a tomboy tyke.

Photo by Joe Chielli, Church Street Studios

UP

The “C” Word

as told to us by “Jami’s Dad,” Jim

Cancer is a pretty

powerful word. It means an awful lot—with emphasis on the word awful. It does not discriminate. This much I learned in 1990 during a simple follow-up visit that led to a diagnosis of Cancer in the floor of my mouth. I was in my early fifties and made a practice of ignoring years of warnings by the Surgeon General. All those decades of “Demon Tobacco” use came home to roost. But now? I was “too young” and in “too good of shape!” I was playing a lot of tennis and cycling quite a bit. I felt invincible! Let me be clear. Surgery, coupled with a long recovery period, snapped me out of denial and into reality.

I was diagnosed by a

surgeon who unexpectedly took ill, which prolonged the period of shock and the longing to “get this thing out of me.” I had to restart the process anew (as my initial surgeon would be out of action for a long time) and this time around I chose the University of Pennsylvania, mostly because of their large staff of surgeons. I had a lot of time to let my imagination and fears run wild. However, I was fortunate to be in the situation where both of my daughters, Lori and Jami, were grown and getting on with their lives and my wife, Beverly, was self-sufficient after my years of international travel, which often left her to deal with the problems on the home front solo. I remember when things got a little dicey a few times during my travels (Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Africa, Asia, etc.) saying a secret little prayer/pact “Please, just let get me through this to help get my kids grown and I will accept—whatever.”

Well, I found you can’t prep for “whatevers.”

Once I was told the grim news, I felt a serious disconnect with what was going on around me. When people conversed with me, I only absorbed about fifty percent due to my own distractions. I was constantly letting my mind wander to the “what ifs.” I was terrified of potentially becoming a burden to my wife and to my family. Admittedly, I just didn’t handle my feelings and emotions as well as I should have. I was facing a serious illness and my own mortality as the world around me kept going, kept moving, yet on the inside I was completely frozen with fear of the unknown.

Fortunately, due to the excellence of the surgeons

and support staff at U Penn, after ten days in the hospital and a long in-home recovery period, I was able to return to a “normal” life. Surgery was all that was needed and I escaped Radiation/Chemotherapy.

I’ve got WHAT?

During the years that followed, I managed to move this unpleasant period of my life to a nice tree-lined street in the way back neighborhood of my mind. This bliss, however, came to a screaming halt each year when I had my annual chest X-ray/CT scan. The goal? To identify anything new or abnormal. I now had a “history.” And while I moved that skirmish with cancer to the back of my memory, the doctors kept wanting to visit that neighborhood.



Me and my Dad.

In 1998, a suspicious “spot” showed up on my

lung. Since I felt great, and showed no signs of fatigue or sickness, I was still relatively optimistic. I underwent a Bronchoscopy and a CT needle biopsy. However, during the biopsy, they were unable to locate the area in question. As the medical staff scratched their heads, the lab report came back with a more definitive picture. Tuberculosis! What the (bleep)? Who the heck gets TB anymore! I thought that disease went the way of the dinosaur. I guess it was probably lying dormant in my system, resulting from my years of traveling through third world countries. I was more than pleased to accept this diagnosis. I spent the next six months ingesting the “cocktail” of medications required to combat this. This was a prime example of “dodging the bullet.” Again, I went on my way feeling invincible (comparatively) living, loving life, enjoying my grandsons, Derek and Darion, as well as about 100 other kids! You see, in my semi-retirement I drive a school bus for Central Bucks. I truly enjoy this job because in my opinion, there’s no other experience I can think of that keeps a person grounded (it’s a ton of responsibility) and yet exhilarated (being around kids and their inexhaustible energy and zest for life). Even when I’m not having one of my better days, just being around the kids laughter and their antics make it a great day.



Dad during treatment and my sons Darion, 10, left and Derek, 20, right.

Dreaded Check-ups Continue

This time, the year was 2007 and my CT scan came back indicating something new in my lung that had not been there the year prior. I was more than willing to accept another TB diagnosis, but being that lightening rarely strikes twice, I knew I had to be prepared for something more ominous.

My fears came into focus a few days later when

my primary care physician, Dr. Chris Herman, scheduled me for a 7:00 p.m. appointment (his last appointment of the day, which indicated to me what to expect). He confirmed it was Cancer and advised I follow up with an Oncologist to see if there was any other activity or Metastasizes (spreading).

A strange feeling rushed over me while leaving

the doctor's office. Dr. Herman was the one that found my cancer seventeen years earlier. He then helped me through the TB scare and now this. I had wanted to tell him "Hey, I am not going to let this one get me easily...even if it does, I am ready!" But, I was not that brave. No matter how I tried to rationalize my feelings my innate survival instinct kicked in. All the fears that I had been able to keep hibernated over the years came back in a nanosecond. What if this leads to my being incapacitated with the result being a severe drain on the family? How about my dogs, how are they going to get along without my daily walks with them along the lake? Distribution of PhillyFit? My bus driving job? Jami is about to have my first granddaughter and I HAVE to be around for that!

Bad Days are Still Good Days

Thanks to the advancement in Cancer treatment over the last 18 years and the skill level of the doctors (Dr. John Kucharzyuk) and support staff at U Penn (again), I am once again able to thoroughly enjoy my grandsons as well as my new granddaughter (Savannah Love), and yes the 100 or so kids on my school bus runs.

This time however, things were different.

The whole situation was not as overwhelming to me. Perhaps due to my previous brushes it made my skin thicker. I was much more aware of what was going on around me and also cognizant that I was not alone in this battle. This time, in addition to surgery (removal of a lobe on left lung), I was advised to undergo radiation as well as chemo to improve my chances, as this was lung cancer which kills more than 160,000 people a year—more than breast, colon and prostate cancers combined! This experience took place over a longer period of time and was peppered with daily treatments, which allowed me to meet many people caught up in the very same frightening, frustrating, and life-altering situation. Even though I had gone through two surgeries for cancer, I never really felt like I "had it." Even while absorbing a daily dose of radiation for 36 days, I didn't feel "sick." Once the chemotherapy kicked in, however, and my hair disappeared, I came to learn what "good days" and "bad days" meant. I began to better understand the full impact of this disease and appreciate what I was up against. Somehow the bad days were still good ones. They let me see that feeling healthy was simply a gift. There were a few uphill battles, but I knew I had to get to the crest of that hill without dragging everyone and everything around me down. This is what kept me going.

The radiation treatment waiting room became

my social study. I never truly realized just how prevalent breast cancer was until I sat along side these strong women, about to undergo treatment. Talk about humility, I definitely developed a large dose of it after witnessing the way these women were handling their situation—with strength and dignity. In this waiting room I also befriended several pre-teenage kids who sat there with no hair, but instead with huge wide smiles waiting for their turn. They too were most likely comforted by the fact that we were "all in this together—no one was alone."

I do not know what lies ahead, but as Dr.

Ramesh Rengan, my radiation oncologist said, "During the different phases of meeting the lung cancer challenge, never, ever, take your eye off the ball." This made me realize how deadly this disease can be and opened my eyes to the need to communicate fully with my caregivers in order to ensure a thorough comprehension of all the facts. When your life is on the line, it's essential to make the right decisions, or to make sure you are putting your faith in knowledgeable individuals to help you to make those right decisions. I am proceeding pretty much on a day-by-day basis now, hoping for the best, but trying to live life and carry an attitude like those ladies I met in the waiting room. Also, if I can just match the smile of those kids, I will know I have done better this time around.

The Early Bird Catches The Life

I am telling this personal story with the hopes of maybe conveying something to others that may help them with this disease. There is a plethora of articles and stories that advise the benefits of diet and exercise and the ramifications of smoking. We all know good from bad. And while mass media efforts have permeated our brain to just say no, we've almost become immune to the warnings much in the same way that car alarms and retail store alarms are no longer truly effective.

These messages are important because when you get right down to it, everything centers on EARLY DETECTION. Eighty-four percent of lung cancer patients are not diagnosed before their disease has spread to other parts of their bodies. While in recovery from my surgery, I was informed my older brother had also been diagnosed with Lung Cancer and it had begun to spread before detection. Typically, there are just no major symptoms until the disease is advanced. In my case, there were absolutely no signs and I felt great, but due to my history, I had annual re-testing. If anything was out of the norm, it led to further testing (which in some cases can lead to high anxiety and fear and extra medical costs—the argument against routine testing), but even without my previous history, I think I would have tried to have it done due to my familial situation. It turns out four of the five of us males in the family have been diagnosed with cancer.

If you smoke now or smoked in the past (I had not smoked for 17 years—you still have significant risk up to 20+ years after stopping), consider speaking with your doctor about screening tests that may be available to you (NOW). Just do it.

In the unfortunate case you are diagnosed with lung cancer, you may want to consider some recommendations authored by The National Lung Cancer Partnership.

- Get a second opinion (or a third or fourth). Arm yourself with knowledge of all of your options as you should start treatment with the confidence you have made the best decision you can.
- Become your own best advocate. Talk with your doctors and nurses. Ask questions. Ask them to repeat what you don't understand. Repeat back to them what you think you heard. Be active in your care and choices.
- Don't let anyone steal your hope. There is much even the experts don't understand about lung cancer, especially how each person will respond to treatment. Forget or ignore the statistics. They tell you nothing about what is going to happen to you. Find doctors who share your hope for survival and are willing to fight right along with you.
- Surround yourself with family and friends. Although you are the one with a diagnosis of lung cancer, your family and other loved ones are experiencing it with you. They are dealing with their own sadness, fears and worries. One way for them to handle their feelings is to try to take care of you. If possible, allow them to help you. It is part of their healing process as well as yours. Be sure to take someone to doctor visits with you to help listen or take notes. Accept offers for help and think about joining support groups in your area.

If I've learned one thing throughout this entire experience, it's that I am responsible for myself. To me, this boils down to taking a pro-active role in my health today and taking preventative measures to ensure that there are "great" tomorrows. I've got a whole lot of livin' left in me and I am going to work hard to enjoy it. Cheers to those women and children and all of you who are facing unexpected challenges in the waiting rooms of hospitals all across our area. Remember, the early bird catches the life. Make certain not to miss

your yearly check ups with your family doctor. This is truly one of the best possible ways to stay PhillyFit; and yes, Jami, I am now a believer, proper diet and exercise does go much deeper than just appearance.

Thanks, Dad... for sharing your notes with us—you are at peace with your life, you continue to teach me and everyone around you reality. May the Lord bless us with another twenty years with you.
Your girl,

*JAMI**

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