

“It Takes a Team to Tackle Cancer” — A Coach’s Perspective

January 18, 2018 By Tom Coughlin

When a parent hears the gut-wrenching words, “Your child has cancer,” their only thoughts are for the child and how they can get well. Financial concerns are usually not on anyone’s radar.

But financial toxicity, as it has been termed, is a reality—especially for approximately one quarter of families tackling pediatric cancer, who will lose 40 percent of their income because of prolonged work absences or loss of job all together, according [to a study conducted by Dana/Farber Boston Children’s Cancer and Blood Disorders Center](#).

When I was the head football coach at Boston College, I saw firsthand the financial and emotional impact that cancer can have on a person. A player on my team, Jay McGillis, was diagnosed with leukemia. Jay was a great kid: A son, a brother, a friend, and a teammate to so many in Brockton, Massachusetts, and the BC community as a whole.

It was incredible to see people come together to help Jay and his family, and I witnessed both devastation and inspiration during his battle. Everyone wanted to do something to help Jay. The BC football team held a successful Lift-a-Thon—a competition to see who can hold the greatest amount of weight—to raise money to help his family with the bills. His sister came home from law school to help. I worked up a schedule that allowed me to make daily visits when he was in the hospital.

His illness brought out the best in humanity. Unfortunately, Jay’s battle with leukemia did not end happily, but his story touched my family in such a profound way that we started a foundation in his name to help families with the financial battle.

The families of children with cancer that I meet, and have met over the past 20-plus years, are worried about losing their child. They should not have to worry about losing their jobs or homes. The bills don’t come all at once, but once they start piling up, the financial side effects can be debilitating for the entire family—the stress, overwhelming.

I always tell parents: No one fights this disease alone. It takes a team. Whether you need assistance paying the rent or mortgage, gift cards for food, help with transportation or paying the utilities, don’t be afraid to ask. During my lifetime, I’ve learned that there are people waiting to be asked to help. They embody the mantra, “I’m not looking for God to bring a blessing into my life;

I'm looking to be a blessing in someone else's life."

These are the people you can lean on. These are people who will make you dinners, offer to pick up your kids from school and sports practice, and be there to listen. Some of them can offer a unique experience that will give your child a "day off from cancer"; others can lend a shoulder to share in the exhaustion.

Childhood cancer will turn your world upside down. But when you feel like you've been knocked down, there will always be someone standing near with an outstretched hand. Don't think, just grab it.

There are numerous organizations and resources available to financially assist families with children who have cancer. Ask your social worker if you qualify for assistance from your treatment center or other local organizations and programs. Many will even help you fill out the forms and submit them on your behalf. Some offer financial coaching to help you sort out the bills, get you back on track, and plan for the future. Let friends and family exhaust the internet for other possible grants and resources.

It takes a team to scale a mountain; let yours help you.

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