After Three Cancer Diagnoses, Couple Exchanges Vows

'There's nothing that we can't face together. We'll never walk alone.'

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Tim Bergeron and Kevin Kelley have been through three cancer diagnoses together, but they remain optimistic and hopeful. For them, the James and Thea Stoneman Healing Garden in Dana-Farber's Yawkey Center for Cancer Care represents that hope—so after 37 years together, that's where they decided to tie the knot.

In a short ceremony presided over by a Justice of the Peace, the couple exchanged wedding vows in the Healing Garden while holding the Hope rock, a familiar piece to many who frequent the tranquil garden. The union represented something more than a declaration of love: It was a celebration of the future.

Both Dana-Farber patients, Tim and Kevin's story begins long before their diagnoses. In 1980, Kevin moved to Provincetown, Ma., at the age of 24 to start his first job as a physician assistant (PA).

"I was a terrible cook," Kevin jokes when asked about how he met Tim, who was a chef at an inn in Provincetown. "I started coming in every Friday night for the fish fry, and our friendship developed naturally."

Nine months later, Kevin and Tim went to the Provincetown Harbor Fourth of July fireworks—and they've been together ever since.

In 1999, however, another life-altering event came when Tim was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL). CLL grows very slowly, and many people do not have any symptoms when it is diagnosed. This was the case with Tim—who was dealing with extreme fatigue, but no other symptoms.

Tim had a bone marrow biopsy that confirmed the diagnosis of CLL, and started treatment with Jennifer Brown, MD, Director of the CLL Center of the Division of Hematologic Malignancies at Dana-Farber. Over the next two to three years, he suffered multiple bouts of pneumonia, followed by monthly intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) infusions to boost his immune system.

“After finishing PA school, I was out to change the world. Then, my world changed without me knowing it was going to happen,” says Kevin, who was absolutely devastated. “Your head first goes to ‘How long does he have? What’s his prognosis?’ Dr. Jennifer Brown allayed a lot of our fears, though. She spent over an hour with us and couldn’t have been more thorough.”

Given the chronic nature of his cancer, Tim began a long process of watching and waiting, receiving cycles of chemotherapy infusions and settling into the Dana-Farber community with Kevin by his side. Then came a second blow: CLL patients, explains Tim, have an increased risk of second cancers, and on Easter Sunday in 2017, Tim was diagnosed with lung cancer.

It was this diagnosis that made Tim and Kevin think about finally getting hitched.

“I remember driving to the hospital for Tim’s lung surgery and thinking, ‘We’ve been together for 36 years, this is ridiculous – our lives need to be spent as more than partners,’” says Kevin.

However, Kevin’s proposal plan was delayed when a third blow hit. Just weeks after Tim’s lung surgery, Kevin was diagnosed with Mantle cell lymphoma—a rare type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Yet even with three cancer diagnoses between them, the couple’s outlook remained hopeful and positive.

“There’s nothing that we can’t face together. I went to every single visit with him and he goes to every single visit with me. We’ll never walk alone,” says Tim.

On January 18, 2018, during a “couples chemo” session, Kevin got down on one knee and popped the question. Nurses from the infusion team videotaped the moment.

“Everyone seemed to know about the proposal, except for me of course,” says Tim. “Reid Merryman, MD, and Ann LaCasce, MD, flooded into the room, in addition to about twenty of the nurses and staff. They are like our family.”

Exactly one month later, Tim and Kevin cemented their thirty-seven-year relationship in a place near to both their hearts.

“Neither one of us wanted a big wedding,” says Kevin. “Tim came up with the idea of getting married in the Healing Garden at Dana-Farber, and I immediately knew there would be nothing more appropriate than doing it there,” says Kevin. “It’s where we’ve grown together and will continue to grow. It’s where our hope is.”

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