Anthony Mastrogiulio - A Cancer Family

In the midst of his testicular cancer journey, Anthony Mastrogiulio found his cancer family.

January 22, 2021 By Justin Birckbichler

Welcome to the Band of Ballers! In this series on ABSOT, I'm turning over control to some other ballsy testicular cancer survivors and patients who have inspired me with their work in advocacy and awareness during and after their diagnosis. This month's feature is all about Anthony Mastrogiulio, who has worked to share his story. Enjoy!

In support of testicular cancer and men's mental health awareness, I would like to share my personal cancer journey with the hope of spreading awareness to whoever needs it, whenever they need it.

During the spring semester of my senior year of college, I first noticed something was off. Early February 2019, I felt a very small, hard, and painless lump in the shower. I didn't want to fear over the "c" word, so I convinced myself otherwise and let a week go by. I was only 22, afterall.

It wasn't long before it became increasingly difficult to climb the stairs without feeling out of breath or having severe back pain, and that "small lump" had nearly tripled in size.

I knew it was time to speak to a urologist...Step 1.

I went into this, my first ever urologist appointment, pretty uncomfortable about the idea of a testicular examination, yet fairly at ease with the thought that I would be told that what I had felt was just a hernia. My doctor looked up at me and said, "I am sorry… but I am 99% sure that you have a testicular tumor."

On February 21st, 2019, I was diagnosed with testicular cancer. At that moment, my urologist informed me the success rate for this disease was very high, but that it was time to "put my helmet on and go to war." The next 24 hours were filled with scans, imaging, and many uncomfortable phone calls. There really is no way to prepare for news like that, but you need to keep moving forward.

The following week, I underwent an orchiectomy to remove the affected testis. The surgery was under 15 minutes and allowed me to go home that same day. Finally, I had a sense of relief that the nightmare was gone as quickly as it started.

Unfortunately, further blood tests and CT scans showed that my original tumor had already spread

to my lymph nodes and that an additional surgery was required. Step 2.

My doctor communicated that the next step would be an RPLND, an intensive surgery performed by highly-experienced professionals in an attempt to remove all affected lymph nodes between the pelvis and chest region. The true fear of mortality never set in more than this moment here; but, we must endure our path and continue the steps.

Courtesy of Justin Birckbichler

After five hours in the operating room, my doctor and his team manually removed 64 lymph nodes and completed a successful biopsy. Words can not describe how grateful I am for all the efforts given by my doctor, his team, and the entire staff at that facility. The recovery process was extremely intense – no eating or drinking for a week, walking was seemingly impossible, but the fellow patients and staff at the facility never failed to put a smile on my face.

The level of encouragement and positivity that filled the hallways was immeasurable.

From the head doctors to the patients, it was clear that this battle is NEVER one fought alone. I had barely been walking, let alone standing up straight, and my graduation ceremony was a week away. It was safe to say that I had no intention of attending this ceremony.

Yet I shared a room with an amazing patient, who walked endless laps with me on that recovery floor, just to make sure that I was ready to walk that stage for my college graduation. He always started his day with, “Let’s make today a good day,” and we did that everyday.

Sure enough, I was out of the hospital two days shy of graduation, and we walked (more like hobbled) across that stage at Radio City Music Hall.

I say “we” because this entire journey is never fought alone, and it’s the people who fight alongside you throughout the journey that hold you up by your shoulders and carry you across the finish line… I always remembered them as my cancer family.

Riding what felt like my greatest high soon came crashing down…Step 3.

Courtesy of Justin Birckbichler

Three months later, my tumor markers and CT scan showed a small recurrence of an existing tumor in my pelvis region, determining four rounds of chemo was now needed. What I saw as the worst finally behind me had now presented itself again – but greater.

This was really confusing emotionally; yet, as my journey had progressed, I remembered that, because of my cancer family, the stairway of cancer is never walked alone. With this news, I was now in need of four rounds of etoposide and cisplatin chemotherapy. I would get infusions Monday through Friday, all day.

After four months of this intense chemotherapy, I was declared cancer free in November 2019.

Today, I work in public accounting but I also fundraise and advocate for testicular cancer awareness through various social media platforms. I am always open to sharing my story and expanding the cancer family! I am still clinically "cancer-free" and am actively monitoring my health for recurrence with three month visits.

The biggest way I advocate for testicular cancer is through my Annual 22 MoJar Initiative, volunteering with Movember. I hand out jars throughout my local community that contain scannable PDF documents on "How to Check for Testicular Cancer," as well as my story and personal contact information. I often reach out to fellow survivors and connect with them on a 1:1 basis. Also, I have been actively communicating with several newspaper sources to push my story through my local community to encourage people to not be afraid to get checked and speak up.

Whether the steps are identical to mine or not, we are all connected through a cancer diagnosis. Thus, we must stay together through prognosis and recovery.

That is why it is so important to reach back, shoulder to shoulder, and help carry your cancer family along. Maybe even remind them to try and make every day a good one. I am blessed for the experiences I have been given and am grateful for the opportunity to share them with the hope of helping someone else.

Be sure to connect with Anthony by visiting him at Instagram @AnthonyPMastro, Facebook Anthony P. Mastrogiulio, or email: Amastrogiulio97@gmail.com. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

This post originally appeared on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor on January 13, 2021. It is republished with permission.

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