Dan Duffy — The Half Fund and The Half Book

Author and activist Dan Duffy says, “I talk about my ball cancer, and you should as well.”

February 4, 2019 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 Dan Duffy, who wrote The Half Book and began the Half Fund. Enjoy!

“We’ve hit a homerun! It’s testicular cancer!” My oncologist of a grand total of six days, Burt Needles, was over the moon.

“Wait, what?” was all I could muster.

“It’s testicular cancer. A simple seminoma,” he beamed… as much as one can beam over the phone.

“But you’re saying I have cancer,” I said.

“Yes, but we’ve got this,” he responded.

“But you’re saying,” pausing for effect, “that I have cancer.” (Editor’s Note: It seems dramatic pauses are a hallmark of testicular cancer survivors.)

“Yes, Dan, you have cancer.” He understood his faux pas of reveling in something that, to him, was good news, and to me, sucked.

“Do you feel good about this?” I asked, now fully rocked to my core.

“I do. I know how we’re going to treat it, and I really believe you’re going to be just fine.”

It’s not every day that you hear that you have a parasitic mass of cells that are not only living in your human apartment, but they’re actively trying to evict you

Needles’ words terrified me at first, but the more I thought about it, the more relieved I felt. This paradox makes sense when you realize that I had lived with a gimpy back my entire life. In high

school, one flailing backhand on the tennis court was enough to knock me out of whack.

And then, October 21, 1996, happened.

In a nutshell, a guy driving his three-day-old car drove into the back of my Jeep. Accident reconstruction said that the car that hit me slowed down to slightly over one hundred miles-per-hour before impact. We spun into the concrete barrier, and in mid-spin… and flip… I was ejected.

Somehow, I flew through the air in a perfectly straight line down the center of the breakdown lane, avoiding both the barrier and the fast lane of Interstate 70. I landed on my shoulders and skipped like a rock across a lake three times. The Jeep was utterly destroyed, coming to its final rest on its roof. Had I not been ejected, I would have been decapitated, crushed, or both.

And yet, I walked away… or rather… hobbled.

For eight months before that fateful call with Needles, I would have sworn that the back pain I'd been suffering with was due to arthritis from the accident. This pain was so bad that this Roman Catholic… while ruling out ending it all… actually prayed for death. I was twenty-nine. I couldn't imagine living even another five years in this agony.

Now I had a diagnosis. And with that diagnosis, I had an answer to why my back was hurting so much. More importantly, I could formulate a plan of actually getting better.

Thankfully, I had cleared the first hurdle without actually knowing it was a hurdle: I had a doctor that I trusted implicitly

He gave me four rounds of five-day chemo, followed by the jewel heist… which is actually the backwards way of doing things. Story of my life. What ensued was a series of utter failures, some physically… most psychologically. Sometimes, I couldn't see the well-camouflaged landmines of regression that awaited me. Other times, the bomb went off in the road miles ahead of me, and I still couldn't keep from falling into the blast crater.

For instance, I was more worried about how my loved ones saw my condition over my actual condition, so I hid what I was really feeling. I would put on a brave face and say, "I'm fine," which was a complete and utter lie… and they knew it. What I failed to remember was that many humans have an innate desire to make things out to be worse than they are. So while I was trying to be strong and not lay the burden of my misery on them, what I was actually doing was letting their imagination get the better of them… and that imagination was far more diabolical than my reality.

But while that was a miscalculation, this next one was thermonuclear stupidity. One of the side effects of my chemo was the temporary eradication of my white blood cells. Needles was as delicate as ever.

"Your white count is a little low," he murmured.

“How low?” I asked.

“Zero.”

The remedy was a week’s worth of Neupogen shots after each of my four rounds. The first fifteen shots were not terribly difficult, as the gauge of the needles was nice and thin. When it came to my fourth and final week, my regular pharmacy didn’t have the shots, so I had to go to a different location. When I got home and opened the bag, I freaked when I saw the gauge of my final five pricks. It reminded me of the thickness of tennis racquet string.

And dear Jesus, did that first shot hurt. I quickly surmised that this was going to be the worst part of my days going forward.

On the morning of the final shot, I felt like doing something grandiose to mark the occasion. So as I sat at the edge of my toilet, I picked up the bag and dumped out the last shot. Only, something else dropped out the bag, as well. And do you know what that something else was?

Adapters to make the needles smaller. And do you know what I did? I jammed the big needle into my leg as penance for my stupidity of not actually looking in the bag. In essence, it’s as if I felt that cancer and chemo hadn’t beaten me up enough. I wanted my own pound of flesh, too.

It’s not to say that I did everything wrong during treatment. I learned quickly that you had to use whatever worked. The nausea made you not want to eat, but if you found a meal that you could actually tolerate, it was okay to eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I learned that putting Nestle Quik chocolate syrup into a glass of Ensure made it infinitely more palatable. I learned that the banana is the only food in nature that tastes the exact same way, no matter which direction it travels through your upper-body plumbing.

Have you noticed that most of the good decisions I made have to do with food?

Sadly, those little victories were few and far between. On the last day of my treatment, I walked out of the room after my final infusion. I stopped in the middle of the hallway, and turned around… almost in disbelief. What the hell happened over the last twelve weeks?

I had so many questions and no good answers

I barely knew the who-what-where-when of my treatment. I had no clue of the why. So I spent the next few years finding out every why that I could, and eventually, things started making sense.

I soon realized that I had a unique set of encyclopedic knowledge of living through a cancer diagnosis and treatment. I also knew, however, that the volumes of knowledge were grossly incomplete. I would definitely need the insight of others… something I’d shunned during treatment.

When I finally started to dialogue with some amazing patients, survivors, and caregivers, I learned

so much useful information. One girl told me, “You know, if I could give people one piece of advice, it would be to buy two good pieces of headwear to conceal your baldness, not five crappy ones.”

“Want constitutes a good one?” I asked.

“Rub it on the inside of your forearm,” she said, “and if it doesn’t itch there, it won’t itch your head.”

Mind… blown.

And that just scratched the surface

By the time I was done, I had so much accumulated knowledge that I knew deep in my heart could help people. With my friend Joe Farmer (both of his parents are survivors), we started a small little charity dedicated to telling stories about cancer. It’s called The Half Fund, and half of all of the money we raise from commercially viable works of art go to charity - think movies, documentaries, and even books.

Soon after, by divine providence and dumb luck, I was asked to blog for the Huffington Post. These would eventually become the basis for my story, The Half Book: He’s Taking His Ball and Going Home. It became our first project for The Half Fund, and as of this writing, we’ve donated $3000 to the American Cancer Society from the profits of our sales.

I actually have an inordinate amount of friends who have had cancer, and the vast majority of them never, ever talk about it

It’s as if they survived it, and now they’re simply moving on with their lives. I don’t necessarily blame them, but it is not how I can live my life. While I wouldn’t wish cancer on anyone, it put everything into perspective that should have already been in place. With the knowledge I have, I want to help make it easier on others who will invariably go through the same thing.

I know that cancer is not always the easiest thing to talk about for men, especially testicular cancer. Just because of where it’s located, and because it’s related to our manhood, many men are embarrassed by it. I know of several young men who are no longer with us who actually knew they had something wrong with them down there, but said nothing for fear of being laughed at. By not speaking up, they ensured there would be no laughter.

Only tears.

That’s why I fight tirelessly to encourage men to speak up, to seek advice, and to not be afraid of walking back into the fire of survival and re-engagement. It absolutely makes a difference. Not a month ago, a friend called and asked me, “Hey what type of cancer did you have?”

“Ball,” I said.

“Ah, okay. So one side is bigger than the…”

“Go have it checked,” I said.

“But…”

“Tomorrow. I’m not kidding. And I’ll be here for you every step of the way,” I said.

“But I don’t have a urolo…”

“Go to an urgent care, get a referral, and go get checked tomorrow,” I reiterated as sternly as I could.

Yesterday, he posted to Facebook that they caught his cancer at stage one, and he is now a proud one-bagger. (Editor’s Note: Here at ABSOT, we prefer the term Uniballer, but I’ll let it slide this one time.) I almost shed a tear.

Almost.

Be sure to connect with Dan by visiting him at Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or via E-mail. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

Know someone (or even yourself!) who is supporting TC awareness and would be willing to share their story? Drop their name, contact, and why they should be featured into this Google Form and I’ll reach out to them and/or you!

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