

Holiday Card Uses Humor to Send Serious Message About Colon Cancer Screening

“Co-Ho-Ho-lon cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths in the U.S.”

December 28, 2023 By [Colon Cancer Foundation](#)

By Matthew Tolzmann

Twenty years ago, my dad was diagnosed with stage 3B colon cancer. He was 60 years old, and he had scheduled his first-ever colonoscopy—but he required colon cancer surgery before the day of his scheduled screening. My dad started chemotherapy, but landed in the hospital when the treatment nearly killed him. He’s a pastor by profession, and the only time he didn’t feel nauseous for his year of chemotherapy was when he was preaching.

My dad is a cancer survivor of twenty years now. I’m so grateful that he was given these twenty years and counting, but I feel bad that he had to go through that year of hell. I’m positive that if he were to have had a colonoscopy at age 45, he would never have needed that year of chemotherapy.

The Tolzmann family holiday card

Courtesy of Colon Cancer Foundation/Matthew Tolzmann

Because of this family history, I am considered high risk and my doctor recommended that I have my first colonoscopy when I was 35. My dad actually gave my brother and me colonoscopies for Christmas presents that year! My dad was willing to pay whatever it cost, to save us from what he endured, but I was fortunate that my insurance covered everything. When I was 35, I had incredible insurance through my employer and my first three colonoscopies were covered with basically no extra cost to me. My insurance changed to a marketplace plan and it appeared I was going to have to pay quite a bit because all of my colonoscopies are considered “diagnostic.” The insurance, however, ended up covering most, if not all, of the cost. I was amazed. My insurance has changed again, so in another few years I’ll see if it’s still covered!

Editor’s note: Additional information about screening guidance and insurance coverage [can be found here](#).

My first screening colonoscopy showed several precancerous growths that the doctor removed right then and there. Over the next 15 years, I had three more colonoscopies. The most recent one, at age 50, for the first time ever, resulted in a clean scan with no growths to remove whatsoever. I am positive that colonoscopies have saved me from what my dad went through, or worse.

I’ve had two friends pass away from colon cancer, and each death really affected me. In their memory and in honor of my dad, we sent out holiday cards with a call to action to get screened for colon cancer. I love sending out irreverent and creative holiday cards that make people smile, but I

felt really good about the higher purpose of this year's card. If my card can get even one person to get screened and they find even one growth... Then that could translate to one life extended by twenty years... or thirty... or forty...

Matthew has a Bachelor's of music in Music Theory & Composition from the University of Northern Colorado. He has been the violin photographer for Bein & Fushi Rare Violins since the year 2000 and has photographed some of the world's most valuable stringed instruments. Matthew is also an author and an artist and is currently writing and illustrating a nature science book as well as several collections of humorous essays. He lives in Chicago with his wife, Andrea, and his youngest son, Peter. His oldest son, Simon, is in college in Colorado.

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