James Taylor III — Raising Awareness With the Waxahachie Police Department

James Taylor III shares his story of facing life-threatening testicular cancer and how it has inspired him to have “a servant’s heart dedicated to helping others.”

January 18, 2020 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 James Taylor III, who works to raise awareness with the Waxahachie Police Department and his local community. Enjoy!

My journey starts all the way back in October 2007. It was a seemingly normal day. After working in sales for nearly 15 years, I was beginning to make a huge life change and pursue my dreams of being a police officer. I had applied with the Waxahachie Police Department where I live and was in the next steps of the hiring process. One evening, after I exited the shower, I did a ‘makeshift’ exam of my body. I noticed that my left testicle appeared to dense, heavy, and hard to the touch, which seemed odd.

I asked my fiancée what she thought. She stated that I should make a doctor’s appointment. Instead, I did what everyone did at the time… and went to WebMD. The first thing I read about was testicular cancer, which I never knew existed. I decided that was not what I had and it was epididymitis — just basically a clog in the ‘piping’ to the testicle.

Within a few days, I saw my primary care physician. I was nervous, but fairly certain my self-diagnosis was the correct one.

I remember the doctor saying these simple words: “That does not look good.”

He sent me immediately to have a sonogram at the local hospital. The sonographer told me that he had testicular cancer ten years earlier and his looked identical to mine. He also shared that he went on to have three kids and that it was easily treatable. At that point, without any doubt in my mind, I knew that I had testicular cancer.

I got a call from my doctor stating that I did show signs of testicular cancer in my bloodstream and

that I urgently needed to speak with a urologist. I made an appointment with a local urologist. He conducted an exam and looked over all of my paperwork.

An orchiectomy to remove my left testicle was scheduled within the week. I followed up with the urologist post-surgery. I was still in a great deal of pain after the surgery, but I did get good news that the blood test revealed that the cancer markers were falling (as they should have) and they felt that the surgery was a success.

The doctor believed that the cancer was localized to only the left testicle. However, a small nodule was observed in the right lung. I was told that it was most likely, nothing.

Let's fast forward about a month.

For that next month, I basically sat in the recliner with an ice bag on my lap. Towards the end of January, I began to develop difficulty breathing. I could not understand what was going on. I had been in the recliner most of the month, since the surgery. Based off of my most previous blood work, my tumor marker number had fallen.

I began to search WebMD again and felt fairly confident that I had developed pleurisy because I had stayed in the recliner too much. Later, I attempted to go to sleep, but I as I laid down in the bed, my breathing became even more labored. I asked my fiancée if she could take me to the hospital and she was unable as she had already placed the kids in their beds for bedtime. Eventually, I decided to call my best friend, Casey, in the morning to take me to the hospital.

I tried to rest in the recliner again, as it was the only place I could lie down. The night was rough. I was sweating uncontrollably and could not breathe. Thoughts of calling an ambulance filled my mind, but I was scared at the magnitude of medical bills that were already stacked against me.

Finally, morning arrived. I called Casey and he arrived immediately to take me to the hospital. I admitted myself into the Emergency Room and explained my symptoms to the attending surgeon.

Coincidentally, I had also finally received a call from the Police Department, who wanted to schedule me for my polygraph and psychiatric evaluations.

The doctor ran numerous tests on me to determine what was going on.

They ran blood work and scan after scan. I waited hours to hear what the doctor had deduced. The anxiety was building inside with no hope of it subsiding. On one hand, I was certain that I had pleurisy, but on the other, I was fearing the worst. At that point, I refused to utter the 'C' word, as if it would breathe it into existence.

The doctor finally came into the room. He stated that he had good and bad news. I told him that I was certain that I had pleurisy. He chuckled only slightly and said that I was incorrect. The look on his face I will never forget.

The look of concern and fear that it conveyed, sent me into a terror that I had not yet experienced. The doctor advised that the good news was that he knew what was going on and why I could not breathe and why the pain was so great. The doctor went to explain that the little nodule that was in my lung was most likely testicular cancer that had metastasized to my right lung.

There appeared to be a great deal of fluid and possibly a mass developing in my thoracic cavity. These were preventing my lung from completely opening, causing shortness of breath. He stated that it was beyond what they could handle at the small hospital and I would need to be transported to Baylor Dallas to the Sammons Cancer Center to continue treatment.

My heart sank and I felt devastated.

At the time, I was approximately 280 pounds. I had worked a full time job and was a student in college. I taught martial arts and lifted weights for hours a day. Other than a case on Mononucleosis that I had contracted a year earlier, I was the healthiest person that I knew and had not been sick in years. To this day, I felt that 'mono' caused my cancer, because it broke my body down for months, but there was no medical link to the two.

This was the blow that truly knocked me down. I have and always am a positive person. My worldview is to look for the best in the worst. I try to remain happy and inspire others to love the life that you have been given. This was mentally detrimental to me.

I had to call the police department to let them know that I was going to be admitted to Baylor Dallas and they would have to pull me out of the list of applicants. My world seemed to be crumbling around me. I found it difficult to remain positive.

I had to wait for 2-3 days for a bed to be available in the cancer center. Those days were terrible. I could not breathe. I was given fresh oxygen constantly and propped upright in the hospital bed to try to breathe, which was a struggle in itself. Imagine the feeling of every time you take a breath, you had to force it.

I was beginning to feel that this was my end. At 31 years old, I began to accept that, I had lived a good life, but God needed me there with him.

I got the bed at Baylor Dallas and the oncologist advised me that they would need to run a barrage of tests.

Poke after poke with needles — I had begun to feel like my mother's tomato-shaped pin cushion.

The results were finally in. The oncologist had, what he felt, was the best treatment plan in place to treat me. He stated that they were going to try a round of chemotherapy. Additionally, he would try a procedure called a thorentesis, a process where a long needle is pushed through my back to try to draw fluid out of the lung to give me some relief. A localized numbing agent was applied and the doctor asked me to hold on the edge of the hospital bed. He stated that it was going to be

‘slightly’ uncomfortable.

‘Slightly’ was a slight understatement. It felt like he was driving a spike through my back. I cannot describe the pain. The ‘local’ did not relieve any of the discomfort.

The doctor was unsuccessful with the draw. He stated that that they were going to need to try the process again, but with the assistance of a sonogram to pinpoint the needle within the body. They wheeled me downstairs to try again.

I was fortunate with being blessed with a high tolerance to pain, but needless to say, I had a great deal of anxiety setting in, knowing that I would have to face the pain of the procedure again. The doctor tried again and they successfully removed less than one CC of fluid… which did not help.

The oncologist had to readjust his treatment plan.

He spoke with a surgeon on the next battle to face. The surgeon met with me on another procedure called a thoracotomy. This process involves a major surgery into the lung cavity to go in to remove fluid to determine exactly what was going on, exploratory surgery as it were. (Later, it was found to be blood from the lung.)

The surgeon spoke to me for a long time. He explained the risks of just the anesthesia and what was involved in the surgery. The surgeon stated that he had done the operation many times, but there could always be complications. He was optimistic that he could figure out the cause and fix the problem. My chances for survival were going down by the day and time was of the essence.

The surgery was scheduled within the week.

The surgery was performed. The surgeon found that the ‘little nodule’ on my lung was actually testicular cancer that had metastasized into my thoracic cavity. It created a tumor in the lower portion of my lung. The tumor encased in the bottom lobe of the lung broke off and the thoracic cavity was filling with blood.

He was able to seal off the lung and remove all of the blood, which had dried because of the air being released into the cavity. I woke up in ICU. The doctor described the blood as being the consistency of boot leather. He stated that they removed amount 3 liters of contaminated blood and I needed numerous transfusions.

ICU was rough. I woke up with numerous tubes going into me. There were arterial IV’s in both wrists. I was intubated and I had a feeding tube going through my nose. I had two chest tubes to drain the fluid. It was difficult to breath still and my throat felt extremely raw.

I was only allowed ice chips for a few days, but it was pointless, because the ice chips just melted and simply drained through my tubes. Yet it helped me mentally cope with taking in no food or liquid.

Finally, I was released from ICU to a normal room.

I recall every day, my pastor would bring a team of prayer warriors in to pray for me and spend time there. He would walk in every day and say, “My, my, my, JT, you look terrible.” I would always reply, “But, God gave me another day!”

That was my outlook. Every day that I was breathing was a blessing. Every day above ground was another day that I did not have to spend below it.

The recovery was slow. I began having to breathe through a spirometer, a device that helps you reopen the lungs after surgery. Chemo was administered almost daily, as was blood work. I had been poked constantly with needles and the pain was unbearable. I refused to take the morphine that was administered because I was afraid of addiction issues. It was only given when I was at my worst level of pain.

I wanted to remember everything with a ‘clear head’ so that if I lived through this, I would have one amazing testimony.

One day, a respiratory therapist came into the room to give me an albuterol treatment with a machine. I called it the ‘green machine’ because the device was a painted green metal. The therapist stepped away, while I was taking the treatment. I lost my rhythm of breathing and started to hyperventilate and could not catch my breath.

I looked over to my mother to express my pain and anguish. She got the therapist and the machine was removed. I tried to recover, but the pain was intense. Everything hurt. My lungs felt as though they were going to explode. My head was pounding. I was administered a dilaudid injection and a dilaudid patch was applied to my arm. Then, I looked over to my mother and told her to call my fiancée and my pastor.

Suddenly, I was done and slipped into a coma.

I remember everything when I was unconscious. I remember the doctors coming in. I remember them talking and were confused about what happened. I remember my mother crying. It felt so real, but I could not speak. The decision was made to send me for a CT scan. I remember one of the techs holding my arms in place to have the scan. They determined that there was something showing in my brain, but they could not tell what it was. They had to send me to an MRI to determine what it was.

The MRI was done. They found that I had a small ‘BB-sized’ tumor in my brain. The testicular cancer had again metastasized into my brain. The decision was made to send me back to my room to determine why I was unconscious and in the coma. I could hear nurses speaking to each other saying that I was so young and they could not understand what was happening and why I was slipping away. The oncologist came into the room. He tapped on my forehead with his finger asking me what was going on and what was wrong.

They made the decision to administer some type of reversal shot, to reverse the effects of the pain medication.

I remember my mother and my fiancée's mother praying for me at my bedside. I began to pray to myself, reciting a Bible verse, 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, over and over. In my unconscious state, I looked to the Heavens and asked God to take me. I did not want anyone to worry about me anymore. I wanted this to end. I wanted the pain to cease. I accepted that my journey on this Earth was done and it was time for me to join him.

I had a friend for many years at that time, Casey. We were best friends and had been through 'thick-and-thin' together. I remember reaching out to Casey and telling him it was time for me to go. Casey reached to me and said that I cannot leave this Earth, that he needed me, and that I could not 'go out like that — I was stronger and tougher than that.' I felt what felt like fire coursing through me, an intense heat that I could not describe.

I woke up from my coma, coughing up a black film.

Over the course of the next few days, I discovered that I was highly allergic to Dilaudid. It was also determined that through a barrage of more tests that the tumor in my brain had exploded for some reason.

The initial plan was to operate to remove the blood from the brain, but the oncologist decided that the best course of action was to wait, as the blood had formed some minor scar tissue. I began to heal rapidly. They chest tubes were removed and I began to make some forward progress.

A few days later, Casey came to visit at the hospital. He explained to me that he was awoken from a nightmare. He explained that the nightmare was that he was reaching out to me, that I was in really bad shape, stating that 'I could not go out like that and that I was stronger than that.' His nightmare mirrored my dream almost exactly. Casey does not get overcome with emotion, other than with his child. This took him by surprise. We both knew that God showed us how real he was.

The chemotherapy treatments continued… until I ran into another roadblock. Chemotherapy is very toxic and can only be carried through the veins for a brief period of time. The chemo started to collapse my veins. The decision was made to surgically implant a dual stage port in the right side of my chest.

We continued treatments and after a period of time, I was released from the hospital. I went through a phase of being admitted to the hospital for a week of chemo, then released for a week to two weeks, and had remote treatments 1 day a week in between.

During one of my routine CT scans, a mass was located in my abdomen, which appeared to be a tumor.

The decision was made to have yet another operation called a RPLND (retroperitoneal lymph node

dissection), to remove the mass. The problem was that after the body has been exposed to chemo, the lymph nodes become difficult to remove. The surgeon described the process as removing the intestines to get to the lymph nodes. The lymph nodes have to basically be 'hammer and chiseled' from the spine, severing various nerve endings.

He stated that once he does the operation, there was about a 99% chance that I would never be able to have children. This was quite a blow; one I never fathomed that I would face. I am James Taylor III. It was always my dream to pass my name on to the James Taylor IV. My plan was to try after a year post-treatment or to have it frozen after. I was terrified that if I had a child within the year while on chemo, I would pass on the cancer. The decision was made to have the surgery, as it appeared to be necessary.

The recovery was rough.

I woke up with fifty staples from my lower pectoralis to my groin. I had just had 25 staples removed from my thoracotomy. I was informed that I could not eat until they were able to hear 'bowel sounds'. Day after day, nothing was heard from my stomach.

The nurse mentioned that if no 'bowel sounds' were heard, that I would have to have a suppository. That scared me. The nurse stated that the more active I was, the more likely I would get 'the bowels moving.' I began walking numerous times every day.

There was an old exercise bike at the end of one of the halls and I rode that thing as much as I could. I rode it so much that I tore some of the staples, causing them to bleed. I felt that gentle rumbling in my stomach, on approximately day 14 (with no food). I went to the restroom. I was able to have a bowel movement about the size of an acorn.

I called the nurse with so much happiness that I almost cried… and Jell-O arrived almost immediately.

I then moved to a series on testing and monitoring after the surgery. At the end of October 2008, I was told by the oncologist that I was cancer-free. He stated that I was a modern-day miracle and that these things do not happen. To this day, the oncologist refers to me as his miracle, and I believe that I am.

I reapplied with the police department and made it through the hiring process. In March of 2009, I was hired and have been there ever since. My childhood dreams of being a police officer had finally come true.

This brings us to approximately 5 years ago in 2013.

The department welcomed a new police chief. Chief Goolsby wanted to know my story. He had a plan and I had no idea what he angle he was working. Chief said that there was an international

movement called ‘Movember’ and he thought it might be a good idea for the department.

For years, I had wanted a way to give back, to spread awareness, so that no one would have to face the same battle that I did. Chief came up with a plan. We partnered with the Testicular Cancer Foundation Beard Patrol to pay a donation to grow out our facial hair for a period of three months to promote men’s health and testicular cancer awareness. I told Chief that I loved the idea and I would like to do a T-shirt campaign. The money raised from selling shirts would go to TCF. He thought that it was a wonderful idea, but he wanted me to spearhead the movement within the department.

I told him that I was the man for the job.

We started our first year with just T-shirts, then we moved T-shirts and hats. Now, in the fifth year of our fundraising efforts, we have raised over $60,000 for testicular cancer research for the Testicular Cancer Foundation. We provide TCF fliers and shower cards to people buying shirts.

I have done numerous interviews with the local newspaper, talking about my story, and speaking about the importance of spreading awareness. I have spoken at numerous events and welcome any opportunity to speak again.

I also have committed my life to donating platelets at Carter Blood Care to give back. I have donated over 210 times and donated over 26 gallons of blood and platelets. This is my personal mission.

I was given so much blood when I went through my surgeries that I felt compelled to give to others as it was given to me. Blood, platelets, plasma, are the things that are not made. They have to be given. Blood banks are always dangerously low and it only takes a moment of your time to save another. I was featured on Carter Blood Care’s website for my mission. I was featured on WFAA for my dedication to others.

I do not do what I do for personal praise.

All of the accolades, praise, and awards are very much appreciated, but not necessary. I am committed to helping others in my job as a police officer and it is the way that I live my life. I am committed to spreading awareness so that no one fights alone. I do not want anyone to go through the battle that I faced.

Testicular cancer is 99% treatable if detected in its earliest stages. No one should die from this disease anymore. It is the most common cancer among men from ages 15-35 — the ages that men specifically do not either want to go to the doctor and/or feel that they are invincible.

I thought I was invincible too. There was no genetic link of cancer in my family. I had not been sick for over 10 years and I was diagnosed with cancer. My cancer went from stage 1 to stage 4 in less than 30 days. I could have been another casualty to testicular cancer, but God had other plans for me.

Be sure to connect with James by visiting him on Facebook and Instagram. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

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