# One Year Ago

October 28, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

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One year ago today, I was put to sleep at around 7 am. About two hours later, I woke up 50 percent more aerodynamic and with 50 percent less balls.

It's been exactly a year since my orchiectomy (my orchiectomyversary, if you will), but it feels like this all just started yesterday. I clearly remember the events of October 26th and 28th in 2016.

I was told I had cancer on the 26th. The following video shows my initial thoughts and the first hints of what would later become ABSOT.

This year on the 26th, I spent the day teaching my students, and then prepping a meal for a co-worker who recently had a baby. Being on the other side of the meal prep chain is not nearly as fun as the consumption side of things.

Two days later, I was having a ball cut out of me, and the fiery pain of recovery would be starting soon. In the the video below, I taped my thoughts during the recovery from that surgery.

Today, I'm having a ball watching people be cut open in Jigsaw (judge me all you want, but I love those movies) and will be having a bonfire later this evening. Weird how the past repeats itself, but I much prefer this version of events.

While the physical days semi-mirror each other, much has changed since I entered that hospital waiting room and donned those awesome slipper socks.

Last year, my immediate concerns revolved around what would be happening next. Had the cancer spread? Would I need chemo? (See the video below for my answers, although the video title is a spoiler.)

This year, my thoughts are slightly less dire. Will my students pass their district math test on Monday? (I'm hoping so.) Will I dress up as a scary clown, put a bowl and sign that says "Please Only Take One" on my lap and scare kids as they grab more than one piece candy? (Probably, and that's a sign I should have had on my lap last year too.)

While my immediate priorities aren't about survival like they were last year, my long term goals

have definitely changed. My biggest mission last year was to shake up the world of education with the teaching style of Mr. B. Now, I'm focusing on my own classroom and my students. Fame in education isn't something that interests me anymore. It's more about making impact on my students and community than making a name for myself. I haven't even published a piece on my teaching blog since July.

However, I've put out a handful of ABSOT blog posts, posted dozens of pictures and videos on Instagram, produced 1,000+ bracelets, and begun work on a few major awareness projects. The aim of all of this is far different than my old goals with educational social media. While those were to make my impact and make myself known, this is about the mission and the cause. I want to be a catalyst to help conversations about testicles be part of everyday conversation. I want men thinking of me and checking themselves (hopefully not at the same time, but whatever works). It's less about me and more about awareness. Now, when people ask me what I do, I respond with "I'm a fourth grade teacher and my passion is to spread awareness about testicular cancer and men's health."

In nine days, I'll visit Shippensburg University (my alma mater). I had plans to attend homecoming there this weekend last year, but had to sit it out for obvious reasons. This year, I'll be speaking a group of college students about my journey and goals at the Ship's Got Balls world record attempt. This will be the first of what I hope to be many opportunities to speak directly to men about the importance of early detection and open conversation.

I first mentioned an idea to write a book in February, and I haven't dropped the ball on it. I still have plans to complete it in the next few years, and have been tossing around ideas on how to make it a helpful guide for men in general.

My quality of life has changed drastically since that surgery many moons ago. Back then, I buried myself in projects, instead of finding what was meaningful to me. I'm making better use of my time now. I don't have a perfect balance but I'm making sure I enjoy the life I do have, as at this point last year I wasn't sure how much longer that would be.

When I write these reflection posts, such as the one at two months and five months (that I miscounted and titled "Six Months Later"), I always make it a point to be real and share my full thoughts. I have no outline for these posts and let the words flow as they come to me. Overall, I'm happier with life than I was a year ago, but I find myself getting angry or upset for seemingly minor matters sometimes. After facing a thing like cancer, I've gained a new perspective on life, and it's hard to see others complain about smaller trivial events or things. I may write a post about this in the future, but it's something I've found myself being aware of a lot more lately.

While the physical scar from surgery has all but faded, the mental and emotional side of things still proves to be harder. Fears of the cancer coming back still terrify me more than the haunted house my dad took me to when I was seven. (As an aside, that was the first time my dad saw me physically assault someone and possibly swear - I have tried to block it out by now, but it still haunts me to this day. See what I did there?)

But I’m trying not to dwell on the recurrence worries. I had blood work done earlier this month, and there were no concerns in the results. I’ve been working on only doing self checks once or twice a month, but in the past few weeks, the frequency has definitely picked up. I thought I felt a lump the other day, which sent me into a panic for a few days. However, something similar also happened in April and ended up being nothing. At what point does it stop being constant vigilance and start being the boy who cried wolf?

However, those fears are to be expected around this time, and I know they’ll spike again in December around my next scan. All in all, it’s weird seeing how life has changed in the span of a year, but it’s a good weird. This feels like my second shot at life, and I’m making the best of it. I’m looking forward to being able to actually enjoy fall and winter this year, instead of being confined to a chemo chair or bed.

And if you’re in the Fredericksburg, VA, area on October 31st, feel free to stop by and take a piece of candy from the clown on the front porch.

But only take one, unless you want to play a game.

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