Patrick Dempsey's Goals for Cancer Survivorship

Actor Patrick Dempsey looks to improve cancer survivorship at the Dempsey Center.

February 27, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

Back in November 2019, I attended The AtlanticLIVE's People v. Cancer summit in NYC. In addition to sharing some of my story, including how cancer has impacted my mental health, I got to learn from and meet with some incredible other cancer advocates.

Among these was Patrick Dempsey of Transformers: Dark of the Moon fame (and some other romantic comedies, but DOTM is my favorite film of his). While I knew he was a dynamic on-screen presence, I had no idea he was such a compelling force for cancer advocacy off-screen.

After badgering him to sign my Transformers DVD (I told you I really liked the movie), I ask him if I could do an interview with him about his work at the Dempsey Center, which is "committed to making life better for people managing the impact of cancer." Graciously, he accepted and we had a great conversation about the founding of the center, what makes it different, what he hopes to achieve going forward, and his message for men about their health.

Why did you decide to found the Dempsey Center?

When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, it soon became clear to me that a cancer diagnosis affects the whole family. I wanted to create a space where cancer patients AND their loved ones could get support to help them through the cancer treatment and whatever outcome might ensue, post-treatment.

What sets the Dempsey Center apart from other cancer centers?

I truly believe that the unique combination of research-based and high-touch services provided at the Dempsey Center result in better outcomes for cancer patients and their families. We understand the value of professional services and peer support in a warm, welcoming space.

The Dempsey Center engages a team of licensed and certified professionals to provide the highest quality services. The Dempsey team includes licensed clinical social workers, licensed massage therapists, certified acupuncturists, a registered dietician, and a certified fitness expert.

We also understand that having cancer is an isolating experience. So, we create opportunities for people to meet others who are going through similar experiences. This helps to greatly reduce the

isolation many cancer patients feel.

Over time, as we came to understand the unique needs of children and teens impacted by a cancer diagnosis in the family, we added specialized cancer support for youth and their families.

At People v. Cancer, you mentioned a focus on survivorship in 2020. How did you come to this place to realize it was such a strong need? What does this specifically look like?

Thanks in part to earlier and better cancer screening, combined with new treatments, more people are surviving after a cancer diagnosis. In a recent report from the National Cancer Institute, there are an estimated 146,000 cancer survivors in Maine — that's 1 in 7 adults.

This spring we are piloting a new program at our Lewiston site. Surviving + Thriving is a series of classes and workshops designed to meet the needs of people who have recently completed cancer treatment. Topic areas will include movement and fitness, emotional support, and nutrition. We're very excited about this program and once we've worked out any kinks, we'll expand it to our South Portland location.

I envision survivorship as a major growth area over the next few years. And I expect we'll be agile enough to adjust to changes in the cancer landscape over time.

Are there plans to scale this nationwide? What can other centers do to mimic your most successful parts?

There's plenty more work to be done in Maine before we can think about expanding to other states. We are working with a collaborative of other cancer support centers around Maine to see how we can better serve people living in rural areas. Maine is a very rural state and people often travel many miles to receive cancer treatment. We want to figure out ways to reduce the burden that rural life can add to a cancer experience.

I'm interested in scaling our model in other states, but we need to do that strategically and thoughtfully.

As a man with a large media presence, what would you want men to know about their health? What words of encouragement can you offer?

Many of us men have internalized societal expectations to be strong, to hold it together, to NOT ask for help. I would encourage men dealing with a cancer diagnosis, either their own or a loved one's, to reach out to others. Talk about it, share how you're feeling, don't isolate, ask for help.

There may not be a Dempsey Center near you, but there are other resources — local services, online resources, and other people who have had a similar experience. Seek out any and all sources of support to help you get through whatever it is you have to do. You don't have to face cancer alone. In fact, you'll probably have a better outcome if you reach out for support.

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