Relay for Life and The Pretenders' "Back on the Chain Gang"

It it is that time again. Canadian Cancer Society's Relay for Life 2021 time.

June 2, 2021 By Robin McGee

This year RFL is online again. The virtual ceremony went quite well last year.

Recently, I had my 11-year cancerversary. Can you believe it has been an entire decade since the events of The Cancer Olympics? Since those days of our advocacy, around 100 Nova Scotians a year have access to FOLFOX chemotherapy as their best chance at cure. Think of it: over 1100 people possibly saved due to all our work getting that drug added to the provincial formulary.

It is very uncommon to live 11 years with what proved to be stage IV colorectal cancer. (Average life expectancy is only two years). So I continue to press on with whatever I can do to support patients and families. For example, this week I am presenting as a panelist at the National Health Leadership Conference about improving error and apology practice in the aftermath of serious preventable medical harm. After a misread CT took away the last of my life chances, I tried to improve radiology practice but could not make a dent. However, I was able to argue for improved error and apology training in the NSHA, and they built me into a new teaching video on the subject.

I am in the final weeks of my working life. I retire from the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education on 30 June. Many considered me crazy for returning to full time work in March after my January surgery. As strange as it may be, I really wanted to have one transition in my life to happen naturally, not torn away from me by cancer. To me it is an achievement, a little smugness I hug to myself—I get to leave on my own terms.

Today's song is dedicated to my friend Lila Hope-Simpson, who died of stage IV breast cancer last month. Her cancer recurred after 10 years remission. How can I describe her? She was a cherished leader and visionary in childcare in our region, as well as an accomplished author. The most superlative review of The Cancer Olympics, written for the Halifax Chronicle Herald, was hers. Lila and I would discuss our attitude to our impending deaths. She was remarkably clear-eyed about it, seeing past the fear to the solace of being with family at the end. How she comforted me.

The song I choose is the 1982 single "Back on the Chain Gang" by The Pretenders, found on their

1984 album Learning to Crawl. Lead singer Chrissie Hynde wrote it after a member of her band died suddenly of a drug overdose, followed by another bandmate's similar death a few months later. I choose it because it comingles grief with a message of endurance. Along with its nostalgia, the song conveys resistance to oppression—an answering anthem in this time when the right wing seems determined to undermine basic civil rights. Lila would have nodded and smiled.

I found a picture of you,
What hijacked my world that night
To a place in the past
We've been cast out of
Now we're back in the fight
We're back on the train
Oh, back on the chain gang

A circumstance beyond our control,
The phone, the tv, and the news of the world
Got in the house like a pigeon from hell
Threw sand in our eyes and descended like flies
Put us back on the train
Oh, back on the chain gang

The powers that be
That force us to live like we do
Bring me to my knees
When I see what they've done to you
But I'll die as I stand here today
Knowing that deep in my heart
They'll fall to ruin one day
For making us part

I found a picture of you
Those were the happiest days of my life
Like a break in the battle was your part
In the wretched life of a lonely heart
Now we're back on the train
Oh, back on the chain gang

This post originally appeared on The Cancer Olympics on May 29, 2021. It is republished with permission.

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