Six Years Have Passed Since I Became The Uniballer

Today, I want to compare my life now as a six-year testicular cancer survivor to last year's five-year mark.

November 17, 2022 By Justin Birckbichler

Every fall, I write two separate but linked blog posts: one as a reflection on how my life has changed since facing cancer in October 2016 and another on how running this blog has evolved over time. While the latter post won't be written until November, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that I really have… dropped the ball on writing too many posts in 2022. And yes, I will be using this same joke in that post.

However, the lack of writing directly mirrors changes in my life since last year's entry into this "X Years Ago" series. In the past, I have written some humorous posts, a poem, and comparing life now to life in 2016. Today, I will take a different approach — comparing my life now as a six year cancer survivor to last year's five year mark.

My physical health has been more or less incredibly boring since October 2021.

Don't get me wrong — this is a great thing. At this point last year, I was recovering from foot surgery and had just had my five year scan. Nowadays, my foot is completely healed and I don't have any more scans. These are definitely good signs, but it still can be hard to not have that safety net of knowing a scan is coming up to reassure me.

My undergrad college recently gave me an award of “Outstanding Young Alumni.” And yes, I made many ball jokes on stage.aballsysenseoftumor.com

Taking care of my mental health is still important.

Last year, I shared that I had come off of my anti-depressants in April 2021. To make a long story short, I get pretty bad seasonal depression. The winter of late 2021/early 2022 was the first time I hadn’t been on meds since 2017. It wasn’t as tough as some winters I’ve had, but wasn’t a walk in the park either.

In spring 2022, I decided to go back on the meds. This choice was discussed with my fiance, my therapist, my primary care doctor, and me. As I’ve shared before, I don’t feel ashamed for going back on them and recognize it’s just something I need to be my best self. Of course, other strategies such as exercise, focusing on good sleep, and more are also critical and I’ve been making an effort to ensure those are priorities.

There have been a lot of changes in my life since last year.

If you didn’t notice the subtle mention of a fiance in the last paragraph, you need to go back to re-read for detail. In February 2022, I proposed to my girlfriend and we got married a few months later. That same day, I also became another dad to her wonderful son and it has been incredibly rewarding to get to spend each and every day with two of the most important people in my life (don’t worry, Mom, you’re still in the top 30).

I also shared in last year's poem that I left the world of public education to work for Savvy Cooperative. When I started in June 2021, I was the Operations Associate and was promoted to Senior Project Manager in December 2021. In August 2022, I was promoted again to Director of Project Management. Working for Savvy has been fulfilling and it allows me to spend every day helping promote the patient voice to the stakeholders that truly need to hear it.

To complete this trifecta, my entire medical team has changed since last year. My oncologist, Dr. Maurer, essentially "fired me" since I hit the five year cancer free mark. My primary care doctor changed practices, so I no longer see her (although she did give me a recommendation for a new one). My therapist retired earlier this month, which was well deserved but bittersweet for me. I went into his office for our last session and he shared how much progress he's seen in me over the past three years. While I was initially apprehensive about losing the entire team that took care of my mind and body over the past six years within a small time frame, I found that the handoffs were all smooth and I was able to find peace.

The biggest shift in focus over the past year has been on Justin the Person.

Honestly, I was approaching advocacy burnout. I will write more about this later, but I made the conscious choice to pull back on my personal advocacy over the past year. I don't post on social media nearly as much, and I also haven't written as much. Part of it is because I don't feel like I have a lot of medical updates to share (again, very thankful for that) and I want to figure out where my niche is. No part of me wants to become a lifestyle social media influencer.

Another reason I haven't done much with my own personal advocacy is because I feel like my impact needs to be more than just my story. Luckily, I get to do that every single day at work, so I feel like I am still making a difference, just on a different level.

Finally, for five years, I was Justin the Advocate. In a post I wrote for Cure Magazine in 2018, I wrote "When I think of Justin, words that come to mind are 'survivor, activist, teacher, superhero geek, cat dad, hardworking and determined'." The first three words described my occupations and the last two described how I work. Only two words really described parts of my personality.

If I were to write that sentence in 2022, I would describe myself as "husband, father, brother, son, friend, superhero geek, cat dad, begrudging dog dad, and advocate." Being Justin the Person has been my focus point over the past year, and I feel much more complete and whole for doing so.

And… for the record, my missing testicle still hasn't grown back.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/six-years-passed-since-became-uniballer-testicular-cancer