Cancer Health™

Steve Gavers — Gavers Community Cancer Foundation

Steve Gavers faced testicular cancer in his 30s. Today, he reflects on what he learned and why he began the Gavers Community Foundation.

November 13, 2019 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 Steve Gavers, who founded the Gavers Community Cancer Foundation. Enjoy!

My story begins on July 15th, 1994, at the age of 32, but let's backtrack one month to June 15. I was at work and was having some discomfort. The craziest thing is that I called my mom to ask her to make a doctor's appointment for me. Yeah I know… He had his mom make the appointment?! I work in a family construction business, and cell phones were not so popular back then.

I was able to see my family doctor the next day by pure luck. When I got to his office, I really wasn't thinking about much, but that was when my luck was about to change my life forever. While in his office, getting checked out, he found out I had a hernia. I then told him I really should get a physical, because I have not had one for over 13 years.

As he started to do the examination, starting at my ankles moving upward and finally getting to "the boys"… He stopped and said "Uh oh!"

Now before all this, we always joked around, and I said back to him, "Where in the hell did you learn 'uh oh' in med school?"

But he was dead serious for the first time in my life.

I saw the look in his eyes. He then said, "I think I have found something, and we need you to go have an ultrasound done tomorrow." The next day was Friday went over and had it done. They confirmed it — I had a mass.

In my mind I really didn't think much about it. I was the strongest I've ever been, playing on 4 softball teams. I was on top of the world and as a pitcher, I was in high demand. But that was about to change.

Still with no signs of anything on that Saturday night I went out with my friends. About 10 o'clock at night, I went to the men's room. There the discomfort I was having was my in my left testicle, which had now swelled to the size of an orange.

That's when it suddenly hit me — I had a serious problem.

The next morning all was normal in size, but now the worrying started. On Tuesday, I had surgery to remove my testicle and repair my hernia. For the next week or so I rested.

The doctor said, "It all looked good, but I want you to go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison for a second opinion."

I was now in that mode of what the hell is going on?! In three weeks I headed to UW-Madison to have my second opinion. Once we got there, life was about to change (again) in ways I never thought possible.

We met with a doctor. He was as cold as ice and gave me 3 options. The first option was to wait and see, and the second option was to have a RPLND [retroperitoneal lymph node dissection surgery to remove affected lymph nodes]. The third was, as he told me, "You won't be here next year June because you have embryonal cell carcinoma and you are Stage 4."

My mind just went numb as it hit me that I had testicular cancer.

I tried to realize what was just said. I chose the hardest road and that was option 2. In 4 weeks, I had the RPLND surgery. I had 26 lymph nodes test positive, which put me in the front line for chemo — bleomycin, VP-16, and cisplatin. These have to be some of the most toxic drugs out there. Life was about to change forever. Those 4 rounds of chemo were pure HELL.

So back to UW-Madison a month later to start chemo at my now new summer home — the hospital. At first it started out fair. In the second round, I lost my hair, and third round was tough. By the fourth and final round, my body was starting to shut down, and I didn't even know it. One day, I got picked up by my mom, walked to the car, slept all 100 miles to the clinic, got to the front doors of the clinic, and discovered that I couldn't walk anymore. My mother went and got a wheelchair with an aid, and wheeled me in for my lab work.

While sitting waiting for my turn, I had a seizure. My body shut down and then I flatlined for 28 seconds. I remember waking up to them saying, "His blood pressure was 30 over 30." Wow, a little low, I'd say. After a little stay, I was released and DONE with chemo.

My oncologist, Dr. George Wilding, is now at MD Anderson in Texas, and I can't ever thank him enough for saving my life.

So after all of that, plus having 3 surgeries, 13 hernias, pneumonia right after the RPLND surgery, side effects of chemo, a small percentage of PTSD, the fear of it coming back, I decided that I would not let it control me, but I would control it.

My mother's side of the family all died of different types of cancer, with my mom passing away from breast cancer. My father and 3 out of 9 brothers died of genetic melanoma, which starts on the inside and works outward.

I'm a talker about what happened to me, now you need to talk about you… meaning men's health.

Then in 2000, a new road begins. It's now 6 years later, and I'm weaker than before. There are no more softball teams; hell, I can't even throw a ball anymore. (Editor's Note: Testicular cancer survivors generally experience discomfort when throwing a ball. It's too personal.)

I ask myself, "What the hell happened to me?" But I knew that I had to do something. I started to talk about it to others, and they said to get in touch with a major cancer organization.

Long story short they turned me down for how I wanted to do a fundraiser. So I kept talking, and all the stars started to align. I was introduced to a great lady named Joy; she had a lot of answers for all my questions, and she knew what she was talking about.

She is the widow of #41 Chicago Bears player Brian Piccolo, who had the same type of cancer as I did. I told her what I wanted to do, and she said, "If you have the drive, anything is possible." I just knew we needed to do more.

After a long talk with my father, he told me, "Surround yourself with good people and you can do anything," so I did.

Gavers Community Cancer Foundation was formed by a group of great friends and people believing in the same beliefs.

Our 1st project was to create "The Get Checked Program" that got us started. Instead of hearing, "Man I wish I had a second chance," or, "If I could do it all over again, I'd do it this way," The Get Checked Program aimed to get people proactive instead of reactive about their age-appropriate screenings. With our team we got clinics involved, lit a fire, and got people moving, The outcome was very exciting, and the much larger hospital adopted the program and ran with our very simple, but effective, baby.

We have a once-a-year fundraiser called "Gavers BarnDance." About 2,500 people attend, with 100 barrels of beer, 3,000 meals, an auction, and 3 live bands, which all adds up to one thing — putting the fun in fundraising.

We fund numerous health care facilities and clinics for underinsured or no-insurance cases. In our 20 years we have raised over $8.3 million for cancer screenings and awareness and research.

My next can of worms to open up is PTSD in our cancer survivors.

Without a doctor telling me I have some sort of it, I believe I do. But, as I said earlier, I control it; it doesn’t control me. When I talk about it at some speaking engagements, some seem to shy away from it. It’s as if “mental health” is a sleeping giant, or it is a too big of a subject for them to handle and talk about it.

For me, in the back of my head, worry is always there. I do worry about cancer, like if it will come back or another type, but that’s when I apply myself to more positive issues of life, like what can I do to help someone, teach men’s health to high school kids in the winter time, or just be involved in my community.

It helps me to I always remember that you can’t control the uncontrollable, and that is when you say to yourself, “What it is, is what it is.”

I will not live in that dark room. I must stay stronger than it.

Be sure to connect with Steve by visiting him at the Gavers Community Cancers Foundation Facebook, or his website. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

Know someone (or even yourself!) who is supporting TC awareness and would be willing to share their story? Drop their name, contact, and why they should be featured into this Google Form and I’ll reach out to them and/or you!

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