Teacher Marco Pizzoferrato Uses His Testicular Cancer Journey To Educate His Students

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May 26, 2022 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 Marco Pizzoferrato, who blends his cancer experience with his career in teaching. Enjoy!

I was diagnosed at age 21 in October of 1996. I was student teaching and coaching high school football. While at a practice, I felt discomfort and I figured I must have done something to bruise my testicle. At least that's what I thought, but a couple of days later I felt something the size of a green pea on my right testicle.

When I felt that newly formed growth I jumped up off my couch and called my mom. I was yelling into the phone "I have testicular cancer! Mrs. Moffo said if you feel a pea size growth on your testicle it's cancer." Mrs. Moffo was my junior year health teacher.

That lesson she taught us was probably one of the only lessons I paid attention to that semester in Health.

It was the day we were going to learn about self-examinations and human sexual reproductive anatomy. What teenager isn't eager to pay attention to that information?! Obviously, not knowing then that five years later that would be my reality.

To avoid chemotherapy and a strong desire to have children in my future, my protocol started with an orchiectomy on my birthday in November. When the pathology returned, it showed that my cancer was already moving. Once a blood test confirmed that, I was scheduled for a retroperitoneal lymph node dissection otherwise known as RPLND in December. 1 of 16 lymph nodes that were removed tested positive for cancer.

Good news I thought, so I moved back to campus in January hoping to finish my senior year of college.

The next day after my move-in was my follow-up appointment. Then my world came crashing down again. Walking in with my mom to that appointment I was joking about how I was almost a cancer survivor, not acknowledging that what I went through was cancer.

When the doctor said, “I regret to inform you it’s still there and your only course of action is chemo,” I became a cancer patient that day in my head. A port was inserted to help deliver my meds and starting in February my first round began.

I was scheduled for 3 heavy-duty cycles of chemo and had no idea what I would be in store for. My first cycle was easy, I thought – I got this; no problem. When I finally reached my third cycle in April, I was physically and emotionally done. I use the example with my students when I explain my situation as seeing the bottom, I was right there and ready to leave this place if I needed to continue any more treatments. Luckily it would only take three cycles to do the job.

I was able to graduate from Springfield College in 1998 and pursue a teaching career in Physical Education and Health.

Once you go through chemo you are in a test and surveillance period of five years before getting your clean bill of health. During my second year removed from chemo, I started to feel discomfort again this time in my only remaining testicle. It didn’t take a hard pea to expose itself this time to confirm cancer; it was my blood testing done in surveillance.

This time the only protocol that needed to be initiated was an orchiectomy. I was able to avoid chemo. It was a gut punch and hard reality that my dreams of having kids might be over before any real chances of trying. Suffice to say now, I have 5 kids all due to IVF from the sperm banking I did throughout all my procedures.

I’ve shared my story in every facet of my life; to know me is to know my story.

As a coach, I worked with young men and wanted them to know the importance of self-examinations and that I’m a resource if they ever felt the need to inquire. In 25 years of coaching, I’ve had 4 players seek out guidance but no known testicular cancer diagnosis.

As a junior health teacher, I tell my story to all my classes to begin the course. I want them to know why I’m passionate about what I do and how I do it. I share with them my Mrs. Moffo story. I have a lesson I teach in class about self-examinations for both genders. I know the value of education from my own experience and I’m compelled to be the conduit for the next testicular cancer patient sitting in my Health class as Mrs. Moffo was for me.

Being a health advocate in my professional life isn’t the only way I use my personal experience to promote awareness.

In the fall I participate in the No Shave November fundraisers and awareness promotions. This year I have a student in my PE class that is dealing with cancer in the form of Osteosarcoma. She inspires me with her commitment to living her life to the fullest and not letting her sickness impact

her.

I’m currently fundraising for St. Baldrick’s and will shave my head on April 27, to show my solidarity and to stand with Hannah in her fight. St. Baldrick’s is committed to finding a cure for childhood cancers. As a survivor, I feel I must spread awareness and hopefully inspiration to people I come in contact with.

To know me is to know I’m a two-time cancer survivor.

Be sure to connect with Marco by visiting him at mhsindians@gmail.com. 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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