Two Saturdays, Two Panels, and One Testicle

The past two weekends, I've been on a pair of panels at cancer conferences.

October 9, 2019 By Justin Birckbichler

While my role in each and the specific topics varied, I found each of them to be profound experiences and walked away with many powerful takeaway.

In the first, I was a panelist on "Surviving and Thriving with Cancer" at the second annual DC Metro Young Adult Cancer Conference. I was joined by three other individuals impacted by cancer, including Violet and Maddie, a Stage IV colorectal patient and a Stage II Hodgkin lymphoma survivor, respectively. Through a conversation with Jennifer Bires, we quickly discovered one thing:

Though we had different cancer types, stagings, and treatments, we had many similar experiences and takeaways.

Due to my affinity for reading, I refer to the timeframe after my life as "Chapter 2." However, theatre enthusiast Maddie calls it "Act II." Violet mentioned liking video games, so I assume she thinks of it as "Level Two." Regardless of the chosen terminology, the intent was clear – there is no going back to normal after facing cancer.

Along with entering into the second phase of our lives, we all shared how we spend more time taking time off of work and making the most of the time we've been gifted. Prior to my diagnosis, I never took a single sick day or a day off from work, even though I get about 15 a year.

Now, I am nearly as stingy with my time off. I rather get that time now than the payout when I

retire, especially since public teaching payout isn't awesome. We want to work to live; not live to work.

We also had some experiences where our loved ones and support systems unintentionally threw up some roadblocks.

While I am forever grateful for my caregivers, I had to have a tough conversation with them at one point about how I wanted to start going to appointments solo. I wanted to ask the questions I wanted answered before their concerns.

Luckily, mine were great about accepting that, but it's a conversation that needs to be handled delicately. If you're a caregiver, make sure the patient/survivor gets to be heard before your own thoughts. If you're a patient/survivor, be sure to advocate for yourself and to speak up in a respectful manner if you feel your thoughts aren't shared. At the end of the day, everyone just wants the best for our health.

We also broached other serious topics, like PTSD and how cancer changes relationships with people.

Post-cancer, an ongoing struggle I've had is with my mental health. All of the panelists mentioned some sort of struggle with mental health, with PTSD being frequently mentioned. While it's still something I am learning about (and I am planning to write a longer post about my own experiences with the condition), it's always comforting to learn that I'm in good company in these struggles.

We discussed how it's sometimes hard to connect with other people our age who haven't experienced cancer (and still have all their body parts). Being diagnosed with cancer as a young adult is a unique experience. While others are out partying, we're turning up our chemo drips or going hard with mental health healing. It's sometimes hard to find people who get it, but many of us shared how we've found communities online or through in-person support groups.

As we wrapped up that panel, we found one final thread: humor.

While I like to think I am hilarious, humor has been a vital part of my journey and advocacy. Each member of the panel spoke about how humor has helped them cope with the day-to-day challenges or in sharing their experiences with others.

It just goes to show that humor is truly one of the best medicines… along with whatever your doctor has prescribed for you.

The following weekend, I was the moderator for a virtual panel as part of Gryt Health's first annual Global Virtual Cancer Con.

I led a panel entitled “Brothers in Battle: Breaking Down Stigmas Around Men’s Health and Cancer’s Impact on Mental Health.” Like a cancer-fighting Nick Fury, I assembled a team, consisting of Kyle Smith from CHECK 15, Rick Davis of AnCan, John Falk, and Truitt Taylor of the One Percent Podcast. Between the four of them, they represented the testicular, prostate, male breast, and colon cancer communities.

We began by looking at our lives pre-cancer and how active of a role we took in caring for our own health. Both Rick and I admitted that we didn’t take care of our health to the extent we should have been, while Kyle said he had been going in for annual physicals. John had an epilepsy diagnosis so he was in regular contact with a doctor. Truitt had a variety of symptoms, but chalked it up to his hobby of amateur kickboxing.

Though we all varied in our health habits before our diagnoses, we have now made it a mission to educate men.

I personally got involved in the health space to normalize conversations about men’s health. Truitt stepped up to provide support and inspiration for young adult cancer patients, as he noticed this was lacking. Rick and John both simply wanted to educate men about their risks. Kyle was infuriated that no one was talking about self-exams and wanted to use his creative talents to change this. Bottom line – we all want to encourage preventative care and early detection in men.

Truitt shared a great way to get the ball rolling on these conversations. Rather than waiting for guys to come to him, he goes where guys are, like on his annual softball team. Using a technique that made me proud, he tells men “Before we start hitting these balls, it’s a good time to be checking your balls.”

He also reminded us of the importance of being true to yourself when talking with men about health. Kyle echoes this, as he definitely does with his CHECK15 videos. He shared that he grew up as a PBS kid, so he knew the value of “entertaining education.”

John also spoke about his ballsy approach to men’s health. Wherever he is, he makes loud, public announcements about male breast cancer, including a recent impromptu speech on a boat tour.

The second half of our panel focused on cancer’s impact on our mental health.

While I’ve been working through depression and PTSD, I know I’m not the only guy battling internal demons in the fallout of cancer. Rick started us off by talking about his background with mental health. Depression runs in his family, so he was already well-versed in it before facing cancer. Some higher stage prostate cancer treatments induce depression, so he was extra vigilant in taking care of his mental health.

Truitt said cancer had both a good and bad effect on his mental health. On one hand, he still struggles with the fact that he faced his own mortality at such a young age. On the other, it's helped him to find what he wants to invest his time and energy in.

Kyle echoed a similar thought, with a slight twist. He feels that cancer added a bit more pressure to his life, because it really illustrated that his time is limited and there's so much he wants to accomplish. I definitely get that point too, and I guess we're like dogs just chasing a ball.

We turned to talking about how we cope with our mental health challenges.

This was one area we all had very similar thoughts. Most of the panel talked about the importance of exercise and finding peer support. Rick also brought up the reminder that you should not fear taking medication if you need it, and John agreed. Faith was something Truitt found to be helpful for him. Kyle mentioned how embracing the struggles and knowing you can get through any challenges has helped him.

Even though we were missing different body parts, had different treatments, and advocated for different conditions, it was clear that the five of us were passionate about changing the societal expectations of how men handle their health.

As I wrap it up here, I'd like to take a moment to thank Kyle, Rick, John, and Truitt for joining me on my panel… and for dealing with my awkward closing in which I recommended people get naked to examine their balls, boobs, and prostate.

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