



Photo courtesy of the author

The Cancer Conundrum

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“Don't give up. Don't ever give up!”

College basketball coach Jim Valvano's inspirational words at the 1993 ESPYS award ceremony gave the captivated crowd a glimpse into his fight against cancer, a battle that would claim his life less than eight weeks later.

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Cancer is a foe that plays no favorites. Young, old; black, white; male, female; cancer simply doesn't care. While cancer isn't the death sentence it used to be (the overall survival rates currently hover around 70%), on average, close to 1,600 people will die every day this year due to the disease. Cancer remains the second leading cause of death in America, accounting for nearly 25% of all annual deaths.¹ In the midst of an illness that can ravage almost every part of the human body, we witness firsthand the very best of the human spirit and strength.

A cancer fight is a 12-round heavyweight bout, but it's not a professional athlete taking the punches. It's Janelle, a 36-year-old wife and mother of two beautiful girls, who is in the midst of the fight for her life.

My wife, Tyleen, received the phone call last January from her older sister Janelle. When you live thousands of miles away from your siblings, phone calls are the lifelines to a normal family relationship. Unfortunately, they also serve as a terrible way to share bad news. The two sisters had talked for several months about how Janelle had not felt quite right. Multiple visits to the doctor had produced little results and initial blood tests had come back clear. On this night, however, the conversation was different and included one of the most devastating phrases in the English language.

"Tyleen, I have cancer."

Having been unable to clearly identify the cause of her discomfort, Janelle's doctors had run a precautionary PET scan. It came back positive, she told my wife, Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I watched as my wife's body slumped, eyes slowly moistening. I can't imagine the feelings of receiving that news personally from a doctor, yet sitting in a room with my wife who had just received this horrible news about one of the people she loves the most, was crushing.

I don't like to cry. Of course, I cried when Old Yeller died, at the end of *Brian's Song*, and sometimes even as a Hallmark movie hits just that right chord. In my opinion crying never seemed to make the situation better. Yet there I sat, dabbing my eyes, trying to clear my head and thinking of comforting words for my wife and her sister. As my head continued to spin, I heard a sound so shocking, I questioned my sanity. I heard laughter. The sweet sound of laughter was coming from my wife, and from what I could tell, the other end of the phone. You see, my wife's family name is Murphy, which means they have their own famous law. My sister-in-law had just joked about yet another instance of "Murphy's Law." I looked again at my wife. Her shoulders were no longer slumped and her head was high. Her eyes now showed determination and her voice was strong. "You're going to kick cancer's ass!" There have been numerous phone calls between the two sisters since that fateful conversation over a year ago, featuring a lot of laughter and very few tears. I have never seen two women be so strong for each other.

Since the doctors believed Janelle's case was fairly textbook, there was a level of confidence that this would be a quick bout. For the first few months of chemotherapy, this seemed to be the case. Despite all the horrors that are associated with intentionally poisoning a body to treat cancer, my sister-in-law truly looked great in every picture we saw. To prepare her girls to the changes in her body that were certain to come, she cut her hair in a short, contemporary style. It looked great and as the weeks passed, the hairdo remained. Instead of her hair it was our concerns that started to fall away as this amazing woman cruised through her chemo treatments.

Different cancers have drastically different symptoms, treatments, and survival rates. While an early diagnosis is obviously helpful in treatment options, it doesn't guarantee success. Hodgkin's survival rates vary from 90% at an early diagnosis to 60% for the more extreme cases.²The doctors



assured Janelle that she was in the 90% group. However, less than two months after completing her chemotherapy treatments with a celebration party with her beautiful family, the doctors informed her they were shocked to learn the cancer was already back. Damn cancer! It never plays to script.

The next round of the fight included a two week stay in the hospital to undergo a more intensive chemotherapy and stem cell transplant procedure. From the elation of finishing chemotherapy a few months earlier, she now stared at the reality of an even harsher treatment and time away from her family. She called my wife to share the news. No tears, only a strong faith between sisters and a few more strong words for a strong disease. This time the chemo would take the hair her first treatment spared, but it was unable to poison her spirit and drive.

Our family arrived to visit less than a week after Janelle was discharged from the hospital. My wife was prepared to personally care for the sister she had, to this point, been unable to physically help. Although our family circus of six arrived near midnight, Janelle met us at the door with a smile. For the next week, she was completely “dependent” on my wife: dependent on her to join her on a daylong “Black Friday” shopping spree, where they rode skateboards through Target; dependent on her to taste test the full Thanksgiving meal they cooked together; and dependent on my wife to join her as they chased their children around the playground. We were witnessing a superhero in reality.

The phone rang again a few weeks after our family returned home. Unfortunately, it was more bad news. The cancer with the 90% cure rate had once again defied the odds. The bout’s next round would be radiation treatments. Their conversation had no tears; why start now? It was time for another round and the fighter was ready to come out of her corner once again.

This past summer, 21 years after Valvano inspired the ESPYS crowd, ESPN sports broadcaster Stuart Scott, who was in the last rounds of his own fight with cancer, took to the same stage and gave the world another glance of the strength he and Valvano have shared with the millions who fight the disease every day: “You beat cancer by how you live, why you live, and in the manner in which you live.”

By these words, my sister-in-law has already kicked cancer’s ass.

Author’s note: *In April, 15 months after that fateful first call, the phone rang once more at our house and laughter poured out at both ends. The radiation treatments were the punch combination that had finally knocked Janelle’s cancer to the mat. She is now officially cancer-free and continuing her life as a full-time mom, wife, and superhero.*

¹ American Cancer Society, last modified Jan, 2015,
<http://www.cancer.org/research/cancerfactsstatistics/cancerfactsfigures2014/index>

² Ibid.