

Chapter 10 – Geoff: Trading in his hockey stick for a walking stick

An amazing young man Geoff Eaton stands 6 foot 5, has a mischievous smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Geoff grew up in St. John's, Canada, a natural leader in a family of successful business people and professionals. He had captained his high school hockey team and coached throughout his teenage years. While studying business full-time in university, he ran his own business helping companies with internet marketing strategies. If you asked him then what he wanted, He would say he wanted to take over the world.

A week before his twenty-third birthday, his hockey game began to falter. He had no energy. His buddies blew past him on the ice. He chalked this up to his weight, then 225 pounds. On a fateful Friday evening at a buddy's business reception just turned around to lay his drink on the table and passed out. He woke up staring at the ceiling and was whisked off to the hospital by ambulance for observation.

He was then told his blood counts were dangerously low and his doctor thought he had leukemia. He would later learn it was AML.

Geoff's reaction was to fight -He would get 'aggressive' with his cancer.. He remembers walking into the hospital elevator for the first time. His face was expressionless but the eyes were intense—this was his “game face”—the feeling he got as he was walking to the arena before a big hockey game. When Geoff plays hockey he's there to win.

He created a virtual play-off hockey series in his head, 'Geoff versus cancer'. Each round of chemotherapy would represent a game in the Stanley cup finals. His family and friends bought into his strategy... his Dad bought him the official Mario Lemieux stick, a buddy who works for the St. John's Maple Leafs gave him the official puck – a puck that would stay with him, he wore the same jersey he wore in high school and his family even had an official Cup that he was playing for.

Before every new round of chemotherapy, nurses would set up the IV pole opposite Geoff. Hunched over at the faceoff, stick crossing over the lines of chemotherapy, the puck was dropped.

He told his physicians that it was his game—not theirs. He was the player and they were the coaches. His family and friends would have to watch from the stands. Geoff interpreted every symptom as if it arose during a hockey game. If he got a headache from a blood transfusion, he understood that he had taken a hit to the head from his opponent. When his energy levels drooped, he knew he had to get off the ice for a quick rest on the bench. “For me, in some strange way I felt when I was having pain and discomfort that I was really ‘playing hard’”

Proactive patient.

Despite Geoff’s proactive approach, the medical system let him down a few times during his journey. The first time occurred when his physicians forgot to recommend sperm banking before his first cycle of chemotherapy. This was a huge disappointment. Geoff grew up around kids, coaching hockey, having fun with his young cousins. He fully expected to have children someday. Unbeknownst to him, with the first doses of chemotherapy, he became temporarily infertile. This left him with the toughest medical decision of his life. His sperm counts could recover if he took the lower doses of chemotherapy. But this option only gave him a 20 percent chance of being alive at five years. His chance of cure rose to 70 percent if he underwent bone marrow transplantation (super high doses of chemotherapy), but he was guaranteed to become permanently sterile. He chose life.

Geoff’s bone marrow transplantation, which occurred in Toronto was designed primarily to destroy the leukemia in his body, and in doing so the treatment also destroyed many healthy cells, including his entire immune system. His Dad donated his bone marrow to give him a new one. It was forty days of harrowing isolation in a psychological desert—a minor infection could be deadly.

With stick and puck in hand, he began the intensive chemotherapy. One night, weakened to the point of despair, he slumped over on the toilet. To his left hung his chemotherapy medication dripping in from a big brown bag. A machine made a mechanical whirling sound every couple of seconds pushing the drug into his bloodstream. On his right hung a bag of red blood cells flowing in smoothly.

He began to think about never being able to play hockey again. Suddenly he felt a presence in the room and a tap on his head. A voice from beyond seemed to say, “You are going to have to choose one or the other”—the brown bag of

chemotherapy or the red bag of blood. At that moment he resolved to choose the vibrant red blood. To choose life.

His blood counts continued to improve. After two months cooped up in a hospital room, he longed for a view of the ocean. When the doctors gave him the green light, he literally took the next flight home. Puck in hand, donning his hockey jersey, he decided to send his winning stick home by car, worried the airline would break it.

A week after Geoff got home, the party came to a crashing stop. At 3:00 AM, fevers, chills, and a bad set of shakes signalled an infection in the IV line in his upper chest. Back into hospital for high dose antibiotics.

He was sick. Deathly sick. Each day the frown on his doctor's face deepened. A second infection, plummeting blood counts. Geoff wrote his will and planned his funeral. One organ after another began to shut down—and he became agitated and scared. He was spending what little life energy he had thrashing about. The doctors wanted to put a tube down his throat, put him on life support, to try to paralyze his muscles in a last effort to save his life.

But in Geoff's mind he was still skating hard. He couldn't think clearly. He refused to let the doctors get close enough to place the tube down his throat. His father and brother were pleading with him to let them do it, each holding down a shoulder—a father's nightmare, fighting against a dying son. The tube went in but Geoff was still punching out, exhausted but not willing to let go of the hockey game. Geoff's dad yelled at him, "Have you had enough?" With a tube finally down his throat, Geoff scrawled a note: "Not yet."

The medication had taken effect. It required ten times the normal dosage to put down this monster of a man. He was suspended in deep sleep, barely holding on to life. The next 48 hours was agony for Geoff's family. Each hour the update was worse than the one before. His father arrived at 7:00 AM on Sunday morning to find out that Geoff's lungs had begun to bleed. Two respiratory therapists suctioning out the pink froth. The team was working wildly around him. A doctor was sent out to update the family every hour. Geoff was dying. The chance of recovery was less than one percent.

Geoff was suspended in a deep space. He dreamed he was an infantryman at war, separated from his fellow soldiers, staggering through the deep brush. If only he could find the troops. He stood up in an opening to get a better view of the facing hill. Suddenly enemy fighters popped up and stitched him with machine gun fire in the chest. He was bleeding into his lungs.

Hour after hour Geoff dangled limp on the brink of death. Nightfall. Darkness everywhere. Waiting. Praying.

“Where is Geoff’s hockey stick?” Someone rushed home to bring it in. Clutched in the palm of his hand was the hockey puck. Holding. Holding...

Even when the nurses adjust the IVs they knew not to disturb the puck in his hand. The physiotherapists turned him and stretched him out without displacing his puck. Everyone knew that Geoff wanted to keep playing in this series.

Slowly the numbers on the monitors began to climb upwards step by step, flashing hope and possibility.

Geoff opened his eyes three weeks later. His family was at his bedside holding their breath. They wanted to know if he’s seen the light—gone to the other side and back. Geoff couldn’t answer. He had no idea where he was, and he had absolutely no memory of what had happened. He could hardly talk.

He started with the basics... ‘Where am I? What happened?’ He asked those questions consecutively for days until they were firmly planted in his head.

Geoff ran a hand up his abdomen and chest. His muscles had dissolved. He wanted to give his mother a hug, but he couldn’t even lift his arms. This was still a very dark and scary time. He was terrified of sleeping for he thought that if he fell asleep he’d never wake up again. He was suffering from what doctors call ICU psychosis.

His mother was first to see through the predicament. She understood that if he didn’t sleep he wouldn’t recover. No degree of coddling could settle his fear. Finally she snapped “If you want to get home, you’re going to have to let yourself sleep.”

Geoff looked over at the nurse and scrawled on his pad. “What do I have to do to get out of this place?” The nurse pointed to the monitor measuring the oxygen in his bloodstream. “You have to get your oxygen saturation greater than 90 percent without the oxygen mask.” He squeezed his pucker hard once, then melted into his bed for deep sleep. A few days later he was discharged from intensive care to the medical ward.

Geoff was literally skin and bones. His mother had to brush his teeth for him. The nurses turned him in bed to wash his backside. He realized one day that the nurse who is washing him was the ex-girlfriend of a close friend. But his great sense of humour was always present. The chemotherapy had literally removed the lining of his gut, leaving a problem of unpredictable diarrhea. If he had to pass gas, he would joke with his Dad, “Let’s roll the dice,” what are we going to get this time.

They moved the hospital bed to his home and he began rebuilding. Geoff was so weak he couldn’t give his brother a high-five or shake his Dad’s hand.

He used his hospital bed for the first stages of his strength training. He raised himself up by pulling on the rails. He did these pull-ups every day and eventually was strong enough to hold himself in the sitting position.

His focus in those first weeks at home was to get back on his feet. On September 20, just two and a half weeks after leaving hospital, he made a momentous five-step journey from his hospital bed to his couch. It was a moment of incredible triumph for him. But then as he sat down he found himself literally swallowed by the couch. He was trapped and had no strength to keep himself upright or get back to his bed.

A mere seven months after his first steps, Geoff was back at work. He created a national organization called Young Adults Cancer Canada (then known as RealTime Cancer).

Geoff was told that if he could make it to the two-year anniversary date of his bone marrow transplant, he would likely be cured of his leukemia—and if he didn’t, his chances were essentially nil.

An internal transformation was occurring at this time. He no longer viewed his cancer as an enemy. “I didn’t hate it any more, I didn’t want it dead—just gone.

Cancer is my friend, not a friend I want forever, but it has taught me so many valuable lessons, helped me develop this perspective that I would not trade for anything in the world. I began to look at my life more as a journey. I would just take this one step at a time.” Geoff say he traded in his hockey stick for a walking stick.

Just on the cusp of Geoff’s two-year anniversary, his blood counts began to plummet. His leukemia had recurred. Even though this news was devastating, Geoff understood it as simply another bump on the road. No more gritting his teeth. The game face had softened, a calmness settled in his eyes. His friends thought he was giving up. They thought he had forfeited the hockey game. But Geoff was simply in a different frame of mind. The outward intensity was now focused deep within his soul.

BMT in Ottawa as an outpatient

Four years after his second transplant there is no sign of cancer recurrence. Geoff is a walking miracle. But he’s deeply disappointed he can’t have his own children though.

He continued having sperm tests after his second transplant, always with the same result—no sperm. Then he dropped off his little plastic cup and called in to chat with his fertility nurse who told him he had 0.2 million sperm, with motility of 10 percent!

“I was jacked! Holy shit, how did that happen? This is still a super low count; but it’s a number other than zero and while the boys are barely dancing, they’re dancing!

“That fall, my wife and I got in to see a fertility doc to begin talking about our options for starting a family. We had a great chat, but the doc reassured us that my sperm count is like we’re using birth control; there was no way we’ll have children naturally. Over the course of the last almost eight years, I have begun to love it when the odds are so strongly stacked against me.”

Geoff wrote on his website later:

“Yes, just after my last super low sperm test, one of my boys beat the odds. He heard the start gun and gave ’er, albeit against a much smaller group of competitors than normal, but that doesn’t take away from the victory at all.

“Today, Karen’s belly is the biggest it’s ever been, she looks the best she’s ever looked to me and in another month or so we’ll welcome our little champ into the family.

“So gents, remember, just because you’ve been given tough news about fertility, just because you’ve had tests that show your swimmers to be low in numbers, miracles happen!!”

POSTSCRIPT: Seven years after his second bone marrow transplant, with no evidence of cancer recurrence, Geoff keeps his hockey puck close by. He returns home every day from his work at Young Adult Cancer Canada—to his wife and two beautiful daughters.