



## Chuck Collins

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Oncology Patient

When I was growing up, my dad used to say to me, “You think you’re iron man, but you’re not.” But I lived that way. I took some risks that I probably shouldn’t have. I took many things for granted. I took my life for granted and the lives of the people I care about.

But when you start feeling odd things happen to you and there’s no rhyme or reason why, that’s when you really wake up. My biggest health fear was having a stroke. When this first event happened in March of 2013, that was my first thought.

I was in a studio right around the corner from my office. I knew all the danger signs of stroke. I’m closing one eye, I’m looking to make sure I can see out of both eyes. Is my speech slurred? Is one side weaker than the other?



*“I took some risks I probably shouldn’t have. I took my life for granted. But when you start feeling odd things happen to you and there’s no reason why, that’s when you really wake up.”*

*Chuck sought cancer treatment from Summa’s nationally recognized cancer specialists. Highly coordinated care, administered by dedicated, compassionate healthcare professionals, allows him to remain active and help others diagnosed with the same condition.*

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But the odd thing about it is, one side was just different. My left side was different. It wasn't weak, it wasn't totally numb, but there was numbness and a tingling that was happening and I wasn't sure what it was.

The next time it happened I was at an event. It was toward the end of a long evening. I thought maybe I was dehydrated because I generally don't eat at those events. A friend of mine was there. He looked at me and said, "You okay? What's going on?" I sat down for a minute and drank some water and I was all right. I was able to finish the night.

Anybody else who has something like that happen to them would go to the emergency room right away. I didn't do that. I was too stubborn. When I spoke with a friend of mine who is a doctor - and explained these symptoms to him - he checked my blood pressure and found I was hypertensive. Really hypertensive.

I thought, "Well, okay, that's simple enough, we can fix that." But the symptoms were still there, even after controlling the hypertension. So clearly, there was something else going on. I didn't know what it was, but it had to be looked at.

I went to the emergency room at Summa and some really good doctors and technicians and healthcare professionals did a CT scan and saw that I had what was called a suspicious area... a suspicious shadow on that CT scan.

They weren't sure what it was, but I have to tell you, it scared the heck out of me. It was on the right side of my brain, either in the temporal or parietal lobe, in that general area. They were concerned enough to order an MRI. That's when they determined that it was, in fact, a brain tumor.

And you know until that point, brain tumors were sort of punch lines to jokes. In fact, before I left for the emergency room, I said to my two program directors, "Just don't tell me I have a brain tumor." It was very prophetic because that's exactly what I had.

I call them the brain team. The brain team came together very quickly. Neurology started by showing me the scan and explaining what it was. The neurosurgeons - their physician's assistant came in. Her name was Shannon and she was wonderful. She actually laid this whole thing out, as far as the surgery. I knew from that, that this was serious. They explained to me how serious it was.

I mean, when you think about a brain tumor, you just don't know. It could mean any number of things. "Am I going to lose my mind? Am I not going to be able to talk?". So many things run through your mind when somebody tells you that you have a brain tumor. And none of them is good.

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So, I started trying to make this bad situation as good as I could. I wanted to make sure I maintained cognitive function. The way I did that was by remembering every person's name that I met at Summa. It was easy to do because they were all so great. And that was my therapy through the surgery, which went well.

The next step was oncology. My Summa oncologist was very useful in helping me prepare. First, he knew that I loved words. He knew I was a writer and he was able to use words to bridge the gap between what he does for a living and what is going to happen to me.

Until that point, I didn't know that this tumor was malignant, that it was cancer. I did not know that it was a glioblastoma multiforme. It took me weeks before I could pronounce it. It's shortened as a GBM. I couldn't even get the acronym right for a long time. You start to think that your days are numbered. It's very difficult not to think that way. Now I'm looking forward to years of recovery and getting back to normal.

I learned the tumor was malignant when I saw the oncology team come in because they wouldn't have been there if it was not. If it was benign, they'd be able to remove it and everything would be fine.

They were very careful to explain that we have to be ready. They told me, "There are a lot of procedures that need to be lined up and rather than wait until we get a definitive response, we want to be ready and have it in place for you so you get the best treatment right away."

And that's exactly what happened. Because it was framed that way, I didn't have a big fear of the big C, you know? It also was framed in another way that is interesting. Because it's a primary brain tumor, the chances of it moving to other parts of your body that most of us think of as being extremely dangerous - like the pancreas, the lung, who knows where - was minimized. So, yeah, you have a brain tumor, yeah, it's cancer, but it's still kind of isolated in your brain. No one is saying they're going to cure my cancer, but they're saying, "We can take care of this."

When you first walk into the Cooper Cancer Center, you notice a couple of things. There are people from all walks of life - all ages - dealing with different kinds of cancer. Everybody is treated as an individual. The only thing that labeled my cancer as being a brain tumor is the hat and the scar. But we got in and started to really map things out, and I felt pretty good about it.

I met with a radiation oncologist. He laid it all out and dispelled some of the myths about radiation chemo. I would see him every week and I would see the oncologist every couple of weeks. They kept very close track.

I just went through it and made a point of bringing what positive feeling I was getting out of this experience to the other patients as much as I could. There's some who didn't want to engage at all and that's fine. But you always find somebody who inspires you to keep going, to put one foot in front of the other and to not worry. Just take it a day at a time. And that's how it worked.

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Thankful is not a strong enough a word. Gratitude is the way you should approach every day. But when you're faced with a potential life and death situation, it gets magnified a hundredfold. It's the big things and the little things that I received at Summa that guide my life.

In many respects, my life has changed - not just because of the brain tumor and being able to wear a hat whenever I want to - but because of the strength and dedication of the people who work to fight cancer.

It's treatments like these, it's innovations that I've been exposed to through Summa, that are going to make a world of difference. It's already made a world of difference in my life. So, I'm grateful...I'm really grateful.

I'm hoping to get back to work soon. I've been away a long time. A lot of things happen when you're away from a job like this, so I'm anxious to get back. If the scans remain clean, then I'll have scans every so often. If the symptoms don't return, I should be a pretty healthy guy.

The real people who are heroes are the ones that continue this education, continue their training, continue to find new ways - new trials, new protocols, new procedures - to treat not only brain cancer but cancer, generally.

One thing I learned in this process is that cancer touches everybody. You can feel helpless, but you should never feel hopeless. You have to be able to

continue to draw from your own personal strength, to continue to fight the fight and the professionals will continue to do what they need to do to be prepared for what's next and help us get through this and survive. Once I was in Summa I didn't have a choice, because they were going to make sure that I got through it and got the best care possible.

Summa has proven to be a solid member of this community, a solid member of the medical community. Whether you're talking about the physical plant or the people or the treatment that you get, there's a certain familiarity and a real positive atmosphere.

So I would say, if you have a choice - and I suppose we do now - I would choose Summa for that reason alone. That's not to say that other places aren't good. I'm sure they are. Some of them are very good; but for me, I wouldn't trade that experience for anything.

