



Interview Transcript: Geoff

Geoff is the founder of Young Adult Cancer Canada (YACC, youngadultcancer.ca). He is married and has two young girls.

Location: St. John's Newfoundland Type of cancer: Acute Myeloid Leukemia Age at diagnosis: 22, and a recurrence at 25 Year of diagnosis: 1998 Treatment: He received chemotherapy and 2 bone marrow transplants from his father.

My name is Geoff Eaton. I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia at the age of 22 and I had a recurrence and a relapse at the age of 25. And I am an 8 1/2 year survivor after my second transplant. I am also the founder and executive director of Young Adult Cancer Canada.

I approached my whole experience with cancer like a hockey playoff series. I thought about it in those terms; I talked about it in those terms. Every round of chemotherapy to me was like a game in my series. And the reason I did that, I think, was that it gave me a frame with which to visualize what I was going through. I had never fought cancer before obviously. I had played hockey my whole life. I'm a classic Canadian kid in that respect. It's part of my bone marrow. So it just made sense to me that the mindset that I used to bring to the hockey rink was going to work well in the hospital room. It gave me a visual frame to play this thing out. So sick or in a lot of pain, I would kind of think about it as if I was playing hockey and push through it. It's almost competing with the pain of the chemo or whatever the case may be.

On the brink of dreams

I had moved out just as soon as I graduated from university. I was starting my own little business and was having a great time growing that and being on my own; being 22 and doing all the things that a 22 year old often does. And then when I did get sick I had to let a lot of that go. I was obviously not going to be hanging out with my buddies or playing hockey or working the way I was. The therapy I had was too intensive. I did move home; [it was a] mixed blessing you know— incredibly fortunate to be able to have that opportunity, to have that family support and then, on the other side, obviously a real struggle to let go of your independence. Part of what I think makes having cancer at this age so challenging is that for a lot of us, we are just, or at the early stages of, getting to try out those dreams that we'd been having for some or all of our life.

Control

I never did realize until I had chemotherapy how tired I would get by just having more than two people in my room. I didn't have to be talking. I could just feel the energy drain right out of me. I tried to take control of that and I think it's an important thing for patients to do. Take control of whatever environment you can. And then it allows you to align it to support whatever it is you

feel your path to success is going to be. Take control of your environment, manage your energy, surround yourself with positive, comfortable, good things. So for me, that definitely included my own pillow, my own bed sheets, my own music, my sweats. I would move into a hospital room and I would do my best to make it like my room at home. It made a huge difference to me, those little tiny things. So I mean, that's a very practical thing I think — make it as much of home as you can.

Second occurrence

The first time I got sick with cancer there was no doubt that I was going to get through it. In my mind, I really believed that. The second time I got sick, I did not believe that at all. My foundation of confidence was eroded basically by the recurrence. But I think I learned a lesson. I learned many, but I learned a big lesson because I didn't learn to slow down. I think at some level my second cancer diagnosis was teaching me to slow down because I was not very good at that. I went back to work arguably earlier than I should have. I certainly wasn't balanced when I went back to work. I had no energy and stamina to be out hanging with my friends or doing other things. I didn't have any supports to rehabilitate myself physically in any significant way and I didn't make it a priority either. So I worked. It was easier to do. And I loved it, loved what I was doing. But my balance again was not there and I think it's part of my life long challenge to achieve that. I think it's part of everybody's.

Fertility

When you're diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia the focus of the medical team is to get you started on chemotherapy so you don't die. And that was the case for me. The issue of fertility didn't come up until we started to talk about bone marrow transplant. So when that possibility was taken away from me, it was a real source of anger. For seven years I was sterile and so we went to see a fertility doctor. She just basically looked at us and said, "no, you'll never get pregnant naturally." And by that time you think I would have known. If someone tells me I'm not going to do something, then it's absolutely going to happen. But I didn't know that at the time. But less than two months later— I won't go into all the details— we found out we were pregnant. And we were beyond excited. I don't know how to describe what I felt. So Elia, our first little girl was born the week of my fifth anniversary of my second transplant. Nine months after Elia was born, Karen says, "I want to go back to work pregnant." So anyway, one month we tried and bang we had another one and Mira was born in March 2008. So for each of them, the experience of having them come into the world was without a doubt the most amazing experience of my life.

Fear

I think [there are] two things that I did to help deal with the fear. One was face it. So if I attempt to deny it; so if at any given moment I was having a little bit of what I'll call a "spiral of fear" where I was thinking about what's going to happen if I die. What does that look like for me and everybody else and my dreams and my hopes, my friends and my family? What does that look like? And I would actually let myself go there. I wouldn't deny that. And I would try to let myself go to all the bad places and then stay there for a while and get comfortable with it. I had varying success with that but that's how I did it. The other thing that I did, which I think is a great philosophy for life, but I took risk. The thoughts are there but I tried not to let them hold me back. I took risk anyway. So I went back to work and I tried to reengage with other parts of my life that I really missed. And I opened myself up to something more and different than me. And my relationship with my wife was a major part of that. That was a major source of fear and

a major risk for both of us really. Those two things I think are really important for survivors to take to think about on the other side. It may not be something you can even comprehend when you're in the middle of treatment. For me when I got on the other side of that, it was being aware that the fear was there and diving into it. And not allowing it to prevent me from taking risks that were going to make my life a lot better. Because I think the risk/reward phrase is so true, so true.

Why me?

I felt like I had to figure out what this was all about because I wasn't quite sure. Why did I get cancer? Why me and not my buddy next to me, who sat next to me at hockey for all those years and partied with me and went to school with me? Why me and sometimes I ask that out of anger because there's lots of Friday nights when I was home either just not well enough or didn't have the energy to go out. But I really did want to. And another part of me just really asked the why me question out of curiosity. Because I know that, I know as much as I know anything, there's something there going on and that we're all connected to it. And I really believe to my new bone marrow that everything happens for the right reason—a core belief of mine for sure. I guess I was interested to explore the reasons to find out, for me at least, why do I think this happen to me. And I'm not sure that the reason or any of the reasons was to start Young Adult Cancer Canada but I just know that I wanted to do that. And it made sense for me and it has been a healing mechanism for me. And I don't mean to say that I started it with selfish interests but I guess you could argue at some level everything we do is selfish. And there was a large part of me that wanted to help anyone else that were like me but there was also a large part of me that was still trying to figure out what the hell happened. And I think the starting of YACC was a part of that and has helped tremendously. It's allowed me also to, at some level, come out of the isolation that I was in.