



Interview Transcript: Lew

Lew was the fire department chief and retired during his treatment. He is married with two children.

Location: Lew lives in Swan River, Manitoba, six hours north of Winnipeg

Type of cancer: Tongue

Age at diagnosis: 56

Year of diagnosis: 2008

Treatment: He had two surgeries and had chemotherapy and radiation

One of the things that I found hard to hear and that was “be positive.” It got to the point where I didn’t ever want to hear that word again. Because how can you be positive when this is happening to you?

My name is Lew McClurg, my age is 56, I was diagnosed with tongue cancer in August of, end of August of '06. I had my first surgery October '06. I went through two months of chemo and radiation and I had my second surgery in May of '07.

Words

I think this is very important: my oncologist... basically we sat, the two of us in the room, and he was, he says, “I don’t pull any punches,” he says, “this surgery is going to be invasive.” And I had no idea what the term invasive was going to be. However, I did kind of hang on to one word that he did say and he said, “I can fix it.” And I remember that distinctly and I remember that every day now, that he can fix it.

The surgery

The first surgery was on the right side and then the second surgery was on the left side of my neck. And I should also say on my first surgery they removed half of my tongue and replaced it with some muscle from my leg. On the second surgery he said, “with the second surgery you may lose your voice.” He says, “we don’t know how much is there,” and he says, “it’s very delicate and we’ll be working very close to your vocal chords.” So he says, “there is a pretty good chance that you may lose your voice and your taste.” Well, fortunately I have both.

Travel

I live in Swan River, Manitoba, approximately six hours north of Winnipeg, where I had to take my treatments and also my surgery. Unfortunately, my treatments were right in the middle of winter and my wife had to do all the driving — I wasn’t able to drive — and we travelled in all kinds of weather and sometimes wondered if we were able to make it or not, but we did, and that was hard. Unfortunately when you’re from outside the city any distance, your travel costs and your lodging and your meals are quite significant. Not only for the patient but for the

caregiver.

We were very fortunate that the people that I worked for at that time paid me my wage through my treatment. And that helped for four months — they paid me my wage. So that was a big help. My sympathy goes out to people who are less fortunate than we were, who do find it a struggle for finances, because what you're going through mentally and physically, you shouldn't have to go through financially. But unfortunately it's part and parcel of where we live.

Challenges

I felt embarrassed about going out in public, and basically for two reasons: because of the facial and the neck issues, and my speech. Even though I had been well known and born and raised in the community, I had the reservations of going out in public and I really felt that that would be a huge challenge, and it actually turned out not so bad. It's OK. Being from a small community, everybody knew where I had been and what happened; so what? And it never really — I burdened myself more with it than anything else.

Advice

It's hard to tell someone what's going to happen. Because we all experience things differently. For me the surgery was no problem. I came out of the surgeries pretty much OK. It was the treatments that really took it out of me. But in some cases it could be vice versa. So, if I had to say anything to a person I would say, "hold your family close, close, and your friends, and walk. Go and walk." They told me after my treatments that I needed to walk and I truly believe to this day that that was part of my healing. As sick as I was, in the middle of winter, I walked my wife to work and then I would go and walk with her back home. You do as much as you can each day and you'll find each day or each week you can go a little longer, a little longer, and pretty soon, you look forward to being able. And to this day, I still walk. I never did before this but now I do and that's kind of like a ritual. Every morning I walk.

Finding my way

When my purpose was taken from me, my spirit was broken. And, I came to a point in my recovery that I was realizing that when I was able to get back into a bit of a routine, into a place where I felt very comfortable, which was my shop in my backyard. I looked out the window many times and cried because I thought I would never ever get back into my shop. And I would try a little bit every day and as it increased over a period of time I found my purpose and my spirit was healed. So, for me, I would have to say it affected me that way and I'm sure it must affect other people in similar ways. The purpose is so very important, however small.

Humbled

Prior to this I was a very independent, somewhat outspoken individual who would embrace challenge, and I guess I've been humbled. They told me that there would be a new norm and yes there is, in more ways than one. And I take each day as a challenge and it has humbled me and I certainly appreciate my surroundings, my family, especially my kids and my wife. Words can't explain. I think maybe... like for myself at times I maybe... I know I took them for granted. You should never do that.