

The Messenger **FEATURE****A BATTLE FOUGHT, A BATTLE WON**

Six months after surviving the fight of his life, Manotick Messenger Editor/Publisher Jeff Morris shares his story about what it means to beat cancer

BY JEFF MORRIS

I'm not special.

What happened to me might happen to you. Maybe it already has. If it doesn't, it will happen to someone close to you.

My story about fighting cancer is no different than anyone else's. Everyone's details may be different, but the soul of the story is always the same.

Last January, my world got turned upside down. I was hit from behind while turning right at a red light. I bumped my head – not hard. There was no damage to my car, no damage to the car that bumped me, and we laughed it off and went on our way.

Looking back, I wish I would have got the name of the woman who hit me from behind.

She saved my life.

At the time, I thought nothing of it. But at night, I was getting headaches – searing headaches – where I bumped my head. I had been feeling crappy and getting headaches for months, but these headaches were really intense. I figured I had another concussion. That's what it felt like.

Eventually, at the urging of a friend and business associate, Jason MacDonald, I went to Kemptville District Hospital. In triage, I told them I had a bump on my head and concussion systems. Dr. El Safiti felt the bump, made some sort of hmmm sounds, and decided to x-ray my head. I thought that was weird. X-Rays don't show concussions.

After a couple of hours, the doctor came back. Great, I can finally go, I thought. The Diva had been texting me. What's wrong? What did they say? Are you coming home for dinner?

He looked at me and the next two questions changed my life.

"Can we talk in the quiet room?"

Quiet room? What's that?

Is the sports talk radio station I'm listening to on my phone bothering anyone?

He closed the door.

"What's your family's cancer history?"

Um, I have a concussion. Are you sure you have the right file?

"You don't have a concussion," he said. "In fact, where you hit your head, you don't even have a skull. I want you to look at the x-ray."

He showed me the x-ray. My skull had a hole in it. Literally. It was the size of a hockey puck, maybe larger.

"Something has eaten your skull," he said.

What I quickly learned was that when you have cancer, they don't tell you what they think you have. Instead, they do tests to eliminate what you don't have. He wanted to test me right away for leukemia. I think he knew right away that it was either plasmacytoma or multiple myeloma. They are the same cancer – a white blood cell cancer that originates in the bone marrow and forms tumours on your skull, spine or stem cell – only multiple myeloma has more than one tumour and plasmacytoma is one tumour that has not yet spread. It's rare. The Ottawa Cancer Centre gets about a dozen cases a year.

Meanwhile, the Diva was texting me.

How do I tell her by text I have cancer? Suddenly, this got real.

A lot went through my mind at that moment. I wasn't upset. In fact, I got very competitive. I was pissed off that cancer dared mess with me. "Tell me what to do," I told the doctor. "Cancer picked the wrong guy."

The bump on the head may have been fate. But this was more than fate. I was standing dead smack at the intersection of serendipity and irony.

The most difficult part of this journey was telling the kids. I had to have a one-on-

one with five kids – my two sons, both in their 20s, and my three stepsons, all teenagers. I told them all not to worry. This would be routine. I've got this. We kept it quiet for them more than anything. I didn't want the Diva and the kids to face a barrage of questions from people asking about me every day.

My cancer was a lot harder on them than on me.

For the next few months, there were tests, tests and more tests. Blood tests, urine tests, full body x-rays, CTScans, PETScans, and of course, my favourite, MRIs, where they would practically spray me down with Pam and shoe horn me into a claustrophobic tube where I would sit for the next 30 or 40 minutes with loud buzzers and screeching, avoiding opening my eyes to avoid a panic attack.

The best case scenario, I was told, was plasmacytoma. And, fortunately, that's what I had. I was in stage 3.

In May, we went into the Civic for an appointment with the neuro surgeon. The Diva, my rock throughout this whole ordeal, came to the appointment with me. We were going to talk about the next steps. The doctor said he wanted us to look at the computer screen. "This is in your brain," he said. "It's life threatening. The first opening we have on the OR table, you're going in. You have 60 minutes to do what you need to do to get things in order."

Before the surgery, the surgeon asked if I had any questions. Dr. Alkareif was one of the two brain surgeons who did the surgery. He explained to me what the procedure would be. I didn't understand anything. He asked me if I had any questions.

"So, um, on family board game night, when you played Operation, you never hit the sides and made the buzzer go off, did you? Like, you always won, right?" He didn't



Six months ago, Jeff Morris celebrated his last cancer treatment after losing a large chunk of his skull and undergoing brain surgery.

like that. They showed me the titanium plate that was going into my head. I asked if they could put a red light behind my eye so I could have, like cyborg vision.

He just looked at me, disgusted, and left the room.

Evidently OHIP doesn't cover that.

The hole in my skull was growing rapidly and the tumour was growing at an alarming rate. They cut my skull about an inch around the hole, went into my brain, took out the tumour, put stitches in my brain, removed part of the dura – the skin or membrane of the brain – put the metal plate in, and then stapled my head shut. The tumour was the size of a tennis ball.

When you go under for an operation, there is no concept of time. If you have gone through it, you know what I mean. You are lying there, waiting for the anesthetic to kick in, you blink, and you are suddenly in the recovery room wondering what the hell just happened.

I went from chatting with the orderly who put me under to lying there with my head cut open and my brain prodded. All I could hear was the nurse talking to the guy in the bed next to me on the other side of the curtain.

"Doug, do you know where you are? Doug, Doug, where are you? Doug, Doug, where are you?" Then I heard a voice closer to me.

I was groggy, in the worst pain of my life, and Doug's nurse was getting on my nerves.

"How are you Mr. Morris?"

"I'm doing better than Doug," I said. "He hasn't got a f---ing clue where he is."

I heard the kids laugh. And then I heard the Diva.

"Oh. He's back. That's my Jeff."

What I didn't know at that point was that Dr. Personality who was undefeated in Operation had gone into the waiting lounge and asked to

speak to the Diva in the hallway. Her stomach sank. The way he asked, she thought I was dead. He told her I was fine. But it was Friday. And he said had they waited until Monday, I would not have survived the weekend.

The worst was over, but there was a new set of challenges ahead. I still had cancer. And now I was missing a third of my skull. It was another month of tests. More blood work, MRIs, and bone marrow tests to determine my treatment.

I told Gary how weird it felt with a metal plate. I could feel my skin, but my skull was numb.

"You're a numb skull," Gary, my co-worker, said excitedly. He uses that one every chance he gets. I can also manipulate and move the metal plate around. I'm probably not supposed to, but, hey, I get bored. I told him that not only am I a numb skull, but I think I've got a screw loose, too.

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Before my journey, I always avoided talking about cancer. It made me uncomfortable. Now, I was on the other end of that. No one tells you how to act when someone close to you has cancer. People with cancer don't change, but people around them do. You don't have to walk on egg shells. If you don't know what to say to someone battling cancer, just say "Keep fighting." "Be strong." "You've got this." "We're thinking of you."

When someone acts all goofy with me now, I act pathetic and tell them, oh, it's horrible, and the worst thing is that it's one of the very few cancers that is contagious. Then I fake a sneeze into my hand and watch them. And sometimes I tell them they used smart intelligence in my surgery. "In fact, in this slot in my head where the staples were, I can put a Rosetta Stone DVD in and learn a language while I am sleeping."

In the summer, it was daily radiation treatments at the Ottawa Cancer Centre.

I chatted with people there every morning. Everyone had cancer, and everyone had a story.

The friendships and bonds made were deep. The compassion was incredible. Sure, I wasn't always positive. One time I was kind of fed up when no one else wanted

to take part in the Radiation South Waiting Room Dance Off. I totally would have won anyway.

Rather than ringing the bell after my last treatment, I planned on coming back the next day with my family and friends to ring the bell with everyone there. Little did I know that when I got home that day, the Diva had planned a huge surprise party for me. One of our best friends, Jill Kraft, even had a bell made and engraved, so I got to ring the bell in front of everyone after all.

The recovery from surgery and radiation has been challenging. I am still exhausted. I have vertigo. I have no stamina. Some days I have no voice. I can't stay asleep at night and I can't stay awake during the day. I don't know what the new normal will be yet. But I am slowly getting better. Each week is better than the last.

The one thing I learned through all of this was what it means to beat cancer.

Before, I thought it was black and white. If you live, you beat cancer. If you die, cancer beats you.

But that's not at all how it works.

Beating cancer isn't the end game. Beating cancer is something you do every single day.

Beating cancer is waking

up in the morning, knowing it's a great day to be alive, and deciding you are going to have a positive outlook that day.

Beating cancer is all about your mannerisms, your tone of voice, your body language.

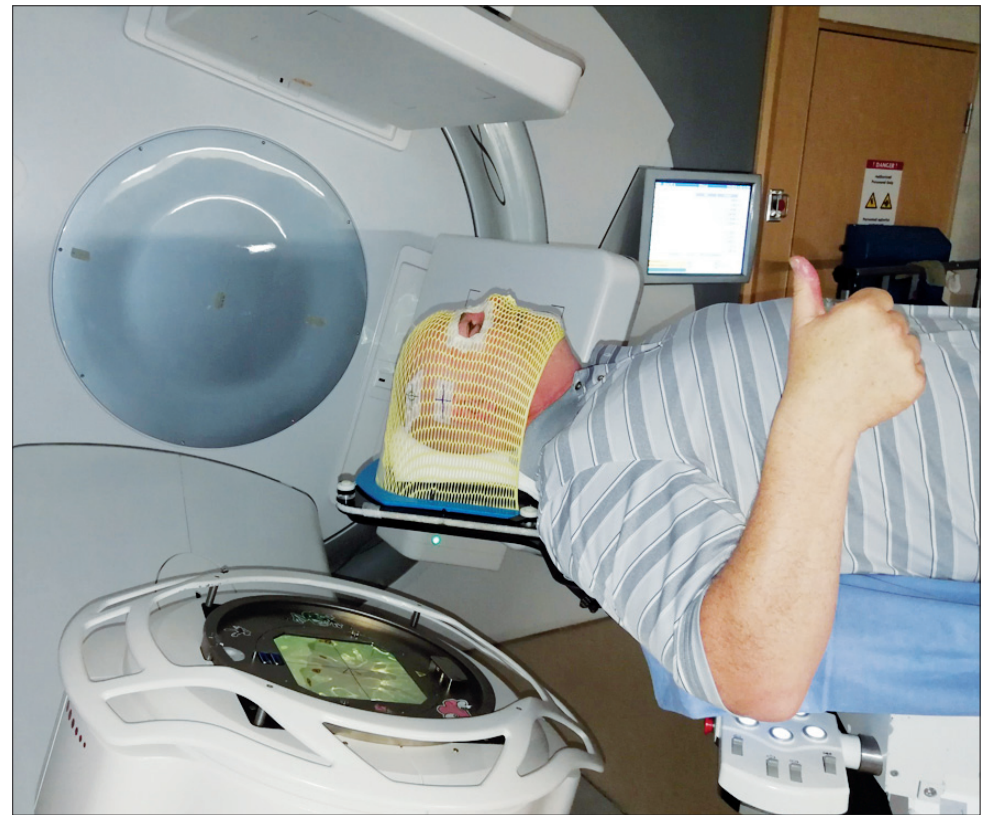
Beating cancer is making the choice to try and inspire and encourage your brothers and sisters who are fighting. We're all like apps on our phone. We can drain the devices which are our bodies and souls, or we can recharge them.

Beating cancer is knowing and understanding your limitations, and accepting that it's okay. Sometimes, you have to rest and let the people who love you to fight for you. I took three naps a day through the fight. Before last year, I may have taken three naps in my entire life.

Beating cancer means being strong and confident but at the same time being humble. I prayed every day, but I found the thought of praying for myself almost offensive. The first day I was in the waiting room for my first of many tests at the Ottawa Cancer Centre, I chatted with a guy who looked about 35. He asked what I was in for and I told him a tumour had eaten part of my skull. I asked him about his situation. "I have pancreatic cancer," he said. "I'm hoping to live until the fall so I can be there for my little girl's first day of school." From that moment on, my tumour seemed so trite and trivial.

Beating cancer means allowing yourself to fully trust the people who love you. That could be family, friends, or co-workers. I consider Gary all three. Outside of my family, Gary has been my biggest support, and I can't thank him enough. We like to pump each other up about how we are old school. What I am most proud of is that I had brain surgery Friday, and on Tuesday, we got a newspaper to print without missing a beat. No one knew what we were going through, and no one had to know.

Beating cancer means letting yourself cry. Emotionally, you've got to let yourself bottom out. I cried at the Ot-



Last July, Morris underwent daily radiation treatments on his brain at the Ottawa Cancer Centre.

tawa Senators Hockey Fights Cancer Night. I cried watching America's Got Talent when seven-year-old leukemia survivor Tyler Figueroa played the violin. When I felt like I needed to cry, I put in Field of Dreams and watched Kevin Costner's character play catch with his dad at the end. It gets me every time. Thank God we don't have the Notebook on PVR or the plate in my head would have rusted from the tears.

But most of all, beating cancer is not letting it take away your passions. I love being a newspaper editor, and I won't let cancer take that away from me. I love baseball. I watched 450 games and opened a lot of packs of baseball cards. I was able to continue being a Canadian Football League off-field official. I'm nowhere near being able to be on the field again as a referee. I'm too tired and it's too dangerous. When I do return, it will be doing kids games, and I will have to wear a helmet. Football referees don't wear helmets, and I am sure that there will be some idiot parent in the crowd who will mock me and chirp me for wearing one. But if I can show the kids on the field, and their parents and families in the stands, that you can overcome brain

surgery and losing a huge chunk of your skull to cancer and get back out there, then that's a life lesson by example that transcends football and sports. And showing them that I can do it is, for me, a big win against cancer.

My family has been such a source of strength through this journey. David, my father in law, checked on me three times a day. My wife has been incredible through all of this. Jon, her brother, called me every day from Vancouver. The kids have been amazing. My family saved me, and so many other people did too.

I am now six months in remission, but beating cancer is not over. I'm still fighting, and I imagine I always will be. Myeloma has a high recurrence rate. If it comes back, I will just have to chemo up and keep fighting. Maybe by the time it comes back, there will be a cure. I might die with cancer, but I will not die from cancer. For the rest of my life, I will be tested at the Ottawa Cancer Centre every 90 days.

There is a 65% chance it comes back. But let's use baseball as a metaphor. If there's two out in the ninth and I'm down by a run, and if I've got a guy coming up to the plate who is hitting .350... I like my chances.

So if you're fighting or you know someone who is fighting, I will leave you with something that the late, great college basketball coach Jim Valvano said during the last days of his very public fight with cancer.

"These are the seven most important words," he said. "Don't give up, don't ever give up."

It's a great day to be alive, and thank you for letting me share my story with you. And to those of you who are in the middle of a fight, live by these words: Tough times don't last, tough people do.



After the brain surgery and the insertion of a titanium plate in his skull, Morris had his head stapled shut and went home two days later.



The medical name for the cancer that caused the tumour, which was the size of a tennis ball when removed, is plasmacytoma. There is not yet a cure for plasmacytoma and multiple myeloma, which originate in the bone marrow, but treatments are improving every year.