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"Memorial Sloan Kettering represents hope."

This story was originally published in 2002. Dave passed away in November 2020. He is survived by his wife, Monica, his three children, and six grandchildren. The Dr. Murray F. Brennan/Gorin Fellowship Endowment Fund still supports surgical fellows to this day. Should you wish to

In the summer of 1992, I noticed a hardening in my abdomen. I was 47 years old and feeling fine, so my first suspicion was that it must be the result of too many sit-ups in my regular work-out. I changed my workout routine, hoping that would do the trick, but the hard spot continued to grow. It was still growing in August of that year, which bothered me enough to schedule an appointment with an internist.

The doctor felt the growth and suggested that I get a CT scan, which I did. When the scans came back, my doctor couldn't properly interpret them, so he sent me to a general surgeon. The surgeon took a look at the CT film and said that he wasn't sure if it was cancerous, but that he'd operate on me to remove the growth and "anything else that was in its way." Neither my wife, Monica, nor I were inspired by such imprecise guesswork, so when my urologist mentioned that he could get me an appointment with the well-known head of surgical oncology at a big New York hospital, I took him up on the offer.

"It's Inoperable"

The oncologist showed my scans to one of his radiologists, who immediately recognized the growth as a [liposarcoma \(a cancer of the fat tissue, usually originating in the arms, legs, or body cavities\)](#). Once he had received this information, the doctor sat back down at his desk and told me, "There isn't a doctor in the country that could remove this tumor. It's inoperable. It would require about 11 hours of surgery and would involve so many critical organ systems, you wouldn't survive the procedure. I recommend that you go home and get your financial and spiritual affairs in order." The way he said it, plainly, with no sympathy whatsoever, it was like he was ordering a pizza.

It was a total shock to me. That was it. My life was over. He hadn't given me the smallest glimmer of hope. Not to mention, I was totally unprepared. I never imagined that it might be cancer. I was feeling too good for it to have been anything that serious.

Chemotherapy Fails

A medical oncologist from the hospital started me on intensive chemotherapy treatments, with the hope that they would shrink the tumor, which, at that point, had grown to be the size of a basketball.

I broke the news to my two daughters, who were both away at college, and our son, who was in 10th grade at the time. I just told them that I wasn't going to be around. There wasn't much I could tell them other than the truth. I wasn't going to lie to them.

There was some shrinkage of the tumor as a result of the chemotherapy, but not enough to change my general prognosis. After the fourth round of treatments, my oncologist said that I'd soon have to stop to give my body a break from the chemo, after which I could continue. When I asked what would happen after that, he said that hopefully the tumor will stop growing for awhile. "And if not, then what?" I asked. He said that, to be honest, one of these days the drugs would stop working altogether. Hearing this, I lost control. I began to yell, telling him that this was no way to live, just sitting around, waiting to die. I said, "I would rather die on the operating room table, then live like this!"

A Glimmer of Hope

It was at this point that the doctor, after some hesitation, recommended that I go to Memorial Sloan Kettering. He told me that there's a surgeon there, Dr. Murray Brennan, Chairman of the Department of Surgery, who has operated on more patients with soft tissue sarcoma than anyone else in the country. "If anyone can help you," he told me, "it would be him." All at once, there was a glimmer of hope.

I met Dr. Brennan the following week. He put me on the examination table, felt the tumor, studied my charts, then said, "An operation is the only possible solution. I believe I can help." To me, these were the most beautiful words I'd heard. Here was someone telling me that he could do something to help me. If I had a dollar for every tear of gratefulness I shed at that moment, I'd be a very wealthy man.

"I'm Going to do Whatever I Have to do to Try to Save Your Life"

Dr. Brennan went on to say that, should the colon be involved, there was a chance he might have to perform a colostomy (surgical removal of a portion of the colon, necessitating the use of an external bag to collect the body's solid wastes). But he finished by saying, "I'm going to do whatever I have to do to try to save your life." That was just it. My life was in his hands and I felt completely confident.

Here was someone telling me that he could do something to help me. If I had a dollar for every tear of gratefulness I shed at that moment, I'd be a very wealthy man.

Dave

The following week, I went into surgery, which lasted exactly three hours and eight minutes. When I regained consciousness after the procedure, Dr. Brennan came in to check up on me. "Do you know who I am?" he asked. I told him I did know, then I asked how I did, to which he responded that I did fine. "And how did you do?" I added. "I did fine, too," he replied. "I was able to remove the entire tumor."

The period immediately after the surgery was very painful, but they told me that the sooner I could get up and start walking, the sooner I could go leave the hospital. Four days later, I went home.

Now, 16 years later, I am cancer-free, thank God...and Dr. Brennan.

Giving Something Back: The Award of Courage

Monica and I decided that we had to do something to give back to Dr. Brennan and Memorial Sloan Kettering. After all, this was the place where my life was saved...when everyone else had written me off. What was I going to do? Shake Dr. Brennan's hand, the man in whose hands my life rested, and say, "Have a nice life"? So as a result, we started The Award of Courage Dinner and Auction event through our non-profit, [the Award of Courage Corporation](#).

Raising money through an annual dinner and auction held in Manhattan, the Award of Courage has helped to support Memorial Sloan Kettering's Department of Surgery since 1994. To date, we have raised over \$3 million. In 2006, after exceeding the \$1.2 million endowment goal, The Dr. Murray F. Brennan/Gorin Fellowship Endowment Fund was created at Memorial Sloan Kettering. The earnings from the endowment support a surgical fellow at Memorial in perpetuity.

We are doing this because, for me, Memorial Sloan Kettering represents hope. Where other hospitals may tell you it's hopeless, Memorial can often give you a chance. As a patient, you can't ask for more than that.

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