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In the spring of 2004, Weldon Diana was occupied with the normal concerns of a college sophomore: finishing final exams at the University of Pennsylvania before heading home to New York City for a summer of fun. Everything changed when he discovered a near golf-ball-sized lump in his groin.

Weldon found the painless lump in late April, several days before summer break. Although he was also experiencing a hacking cough and an unusual lack of stamina during his regular runs, he attributed these symptoms to nothing more than a bad cold and decided to wait until he returned home before looking into his symptoms.

“At this point,” Weldon recalls, “I still didn’t think it was anything serious. Little did I know what was awaiting me.”

(Pre)Diagnosis...by a Dermatologist

Back in New York after completing his finals, Weldon went to a previously scheduled appointment with his dermatologist. At the end of the session, he asked his doctor to look at the lump. The doctor gave it a close examination and suggested that Weldon make an immediate appointment with his pediatrician. During the following day’s appointment, Weldon’s doctor, unwilling to make a definitive diagnosis, suggested that he see an oncologist, just in case. “He said it could be something or it could be nothing,” Weldon says. “But if it was something, he wanted me to go to the best place.” As a result, Weldon ended up with an appointment at Memorial Sloan Kettering for the next day.

As Weldon walked from his family’s apartment on East 79th Street to Memorial Sloan Kettering, he thought it strange that he was going to a cancer hospital for something that still, to him, seemed less than serious. “It didn’t hurt at all, so I thought it was no big deal,” he remembers.

The Worst Kind of 21st Birthday Surprise

Michael La Quaglia, MD, Chief of the Pediatric Surgical Service, examined Weldon and administered a needle biopsy of the suspicious growth on his lymph node. Once the examination and biopsy were completed, Weldon went home for the weekend to celebrate his twenty-first birthday. “I was pretty excited to be turning 21,” Weldon says. “And I was starting a summer job at Fox News the following Monday, so I had a lot of other exciting things to distract me.”

On Tuesday evening, Weldon saw there was a message waiting for him on his phone machine. He knew that if Dr. La Quaglia’s message was “everything’s fine,” he obviously was OK. “But if the message was ‘Please call me back,’ I knew I was in trouble.” Unfortunately, when Weldon played the message, it was Dr. La Quaglia asking Weldon to return his call.

Receiving the News Solo

To make matters worse, Weldon’s father was away on business in Canada and his stepmother was traveling in the central Asian nation of Bhutan. This meant that Weldon was alone in the City, having to face this crisis by himself. He went to the hospital and met with Dr. LaQuaglia, who broke the traumatic news: Weldon had lymphoma. When Weldon asked Dr. La Quaglia if he would be able to work at his Fox News summer internship, Dr. La Quaglia told him that not only would he not be able to work his summer job, he probably wouldn’t be able to return to school in the fall because of the intense treatment regimen he would have to begin immediately.

“Let’s Do It”

Weldon, stunned into a daze, walked home from the hospital alone, trying to understand what he had just learned, thinking also of his mother, who had died of lung cancer five years earlier. “At some point during this kind of event, it’s natural to ask, ‘Why me?’” he notes. “But I quickly realized that asking that sort of question wouldn’t do me any good. I had cancer, and I decided I needed to focus everything I had on overcoming it.” Weldon had cancer and he was going to have to beat it. ‘Let’s do it,’ he told himself during the walk home.

Weldon then contacted his father, stepmother, and sister, who lived in California, to give them the bad news. Knowing that the real battle would begin the very next day, he stayed up late that night, watching movies, trying to clear his head.

At six a.m. the following morning, he went into the hospital for a spinal tap, a bone marrow drill, and another biopsy of the lymph node. He also met Tanya Trippett, MD, Chief of the [Pediatric Lymphoma](#) Service at Memorial Sloan Kettering and the woman who, as Weldon says in retrospect, saved his life.

I wouldn't have made it without [Dr. Trippett]. To me, she's more than just a doctor. She's also a real friend and a confidant. I want to have the same effect on someone else's life as she did on mine.

Weldon Diana

"Dr. Trippett was extremely nice, right from the start," he says. "I knew nothing about lymphoma at the time, so she walked me through what we were going to do to find out exactly what type of lymphoma it was, and then how we would treat it." When the tests came back, they showed that Weldon had stage III Burkitt's lymphoma, a highly aggressive form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Weldon's father, who flew back to New York the day after the bad news was delivered, gave Weldon a good piece of advice, telling him to view his cancer treatment as "pushing the pause button on the rest of his life." Weldon explains: "He said to hit the pause button, to take care of whatever is necessary to beat the cancer. Then, once that's done, hit the play button to resume the rest of my life."

Two days later, after PET (positron emission tomography) and CT (computed tomography) scans, it was discovered that in addition to the tumor in his groin, Weldon had a tumor in one lung and another growing against his trachea. The cancer was so aggressive that Dr. Trippett had Weldon start his first chemotherapy treatment session on Saturday of that same week.

No Gown Required

Weldon made a point at that first session not to wear a hospital gown, remaining in his "street" clothes — something he did throughout his entire treatment. "It might be a little stubborn and strange," he explains, "but to me wearing a hospital gown meant that I was giving in somehow to the disease. And I wasn't about to do that."

The chemotherapy regimen would last three months, from May to the end of August. Weldon found that the days on which he received the chemotherapy treatments were not as bad as he'd expected, but that the week following the treatments proved to be the most difficult part of the process. It was during these times that he had to deal with treatment-induced exhaustion, mouth sores from the toxic chemicals, and nausea — though that was largely controlled by a new generation of powerful anti-nausea drugs. Additionally, early on in Weldon's chemotherapy regimen, a fellow patient gave him some practical guidance. "He told me that whenever I started feeling nauseous, I should go ahead and throw up, which would make me feel better. That turned out to be great advice."

As is often the case with [lymphoma treatment](#), Weldon's chemotherapy regimen included the use of a steroid known as prednisolone, which has been shown to help kill lymphocytes, the blood cells that give rise to lymphomas. Unfortunately, one of the side effects of this type of steroid is that it greatly increases one's appetite. "That was the one of the worst parts," Weldon says, vividly remembering the feeling. "It makes you ravenously hungry — so hungry that it's actually painful."

To help deal with this new regimen in his life, he came up with a number of coping mechanisms, including befriending many nurses in the Pediatric Day Hospital and watching *The Price is Right* on a daily basis.

"Do You Want to Beat Cancer then Die of a Heart Attack?"

A former captain of his high school's track, cross country, and wrestling teams, Weldon also tried to maintain his athletic interests. Inspired by Lance Armstrong, Weldon purchased a bike and decided to ride the pedestrian oval in Manhattan's Central Park. "I decided to ride hard," he recalls. "My legs were doing fine. My breathing was fine. But my heart was going extremely fast." Near the end of his ride, he decided to race up one of the park's biggest hills. "I made it to the top, but my heart was pounding so badly, I had to lie down on the ground for ten minutes." When Weldon relayed this story to Dr. Trippett afterwards, her response was frank, "Do you want to beat cancer, then die of a heart attack?" As a result, Weldon toned down his bike riding.

Weldon made another pact with Dr. Trippett. He noticed that when she administered any of his spinal taps, he never had a headache afterwards — which was not always the case with other doctors. Wanting to help Weldon avoid this, Dr. Trippett agreed to administer the remainder of his spinal taps.

After his final chemotherapy treatment, which was delivered in August, Weldon felt well enough to return to work at Fox News that September. He also went back to school at Penn for the following spring semester. Although he had always been a good enough student to get B-pluses without full effort, after his cancer experience, Weldon decided to really apply himself, receiving a 4.0 grade point average his first semester back and a 3.93 for the semester after that. As a result of his new focus, he is on track to graduate magna cum laude this spring.

Dr. Trippett: Role Model and Friend

Another result of the experience was Weldon's change in career plans. Before his diagnosis, he had planned on starting a career in finance. "After the cancer," Weldon notes, "I realized that finance didn't really appeal to me. I asked myself what did appeal to me, and I realized that it was medicine, where I could have the greatest positive impact on people." To Weldon, Dr. Trippett was a tremendous role model. "I wouldn't have made it without her. To me, she's more than just a doctor. She's also a real friend and a confidant. I want to have the same effect on someone else's life as she did on mine." As the first step in the pursuit of his new career, Weldon applied to and was recently accepted into the postbaccalaureate premedicine program at Columbia University, where he'll start in the fall.

"It has been very gratifying and rewarding to see Weldon conquer his battle with cancer and to go on to do so well. I take special pleasure and a little pride in noting that his experience has motivated him to go into medicine as a career."



Tanya M. Trippett
Pediatric Oncologist

In the end, Weldon believes that Dr. Trippett and her entire team have given him the chance to pursue new career goals. “Memorial Sloan Kettering saved my life,” he says. “If anyone I know ever has cancer, I will always send them straight to Memorial. They did everything they could to facilitate my healing. You get the feeling very quickly that their job is not just to cure you but to make you feel as good as you can while you’re being cured.”

Story Update: February 2009

Recently, I have graduated college and completed my postbaccalaureate program at Columbia University, and I am now applying to medical schools. During my undergrad and postbac period, I trained for and ran two New York City Marathons and I am currently training for the 2009 Boston Marathon this April.

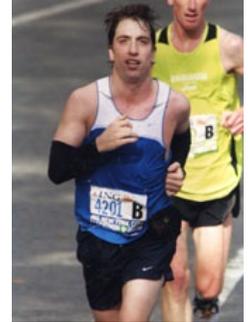
I started running after college in order to drop the weight I had put on from the cancer treatment, specifically the prednisone (steroids), and I ended up dropping twenty pounds in about six weeks. Then, one night while I was walking through Central Park on the eve of the New York City Marathon, I saw all the runners eating their pre-marathon dinner at Tavern on the Green and walking in the finish line area. This inspired me to do something that I have always wanted to do — to run the New York City Marathon.

The best part for me about the marathon is the fact that it was something that I had never done before I had cancer. I trained for and accomplished it after being sick. It was really the first time that I knew that I was just the same as I was before cancer. And finishing the marathon let me know that I was back.

It was amazing to be cheered on by all the spectators, and it was especially moving when I passed Sloan Kettering while running down First Avenue. I ran the first marathon in 3 hours and 17 minutes and this past fall I ran it again, finishing in 3 hours and 2 minutes, which qualified me for the Boston Marathon.

Dr. Trippett came to my post-marathon party after that first race. It really meant something to me for her to meet all of my friends and to be there for me after my accomplishment. She wasn’t just there for me during my treatment, but also afterwards.

—Weldon Diana



Weldon

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