

## **Robbie Robinson**

*Lymphoma*  
Fox Lake, IL

In the fall of 2001, I was praying for a change in my life that would allow me to work from home and spend more time with my family. That prayer was answered in a way I wasn't expecting.

My wife, Julie, was still recovering from an operation she had a few years earlier to take care of a "giant" brain aneurysm, and I wanted to be home more. Julie would go on to have another aneurysm three years later, of which she also survived.

So that my wife would be taken care of in case something happened to me, I purchased a life insurance policy in August 2001. After blood tests and a physical I was deemed fit and healthy by the insurance company.

In late October, I started feeling very tired all of the time. I was cramping badly across the mid section when I ate anything, which shortly became all of the time, not just when I ate. I shrugged it off as best that I could and assumed it was the stress related from the combination of work, caring for my wife, and parenting three daughters and a son.

As time went by I felt progressively worse. More and more health problems kept popping up, so in January 2002 I decided to get a checkup from the internist I had used for the last 10 years. Once again blood tests were taken, as well as most internal exams, top to bottom. Since all of the tests came back as normal, aside from some minor digestive problems, I was diagnosed with "food amnesia." My internist believed at that time that I just wasn't admitting to her or myself how much food I was really eating.

At the time I had a brother-in-law who had recently been misdiagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer, which was now spreading to his lungs and throughout his body. I told this to my doctor and asked her to please try some other tests, since I didn't agree with her diagnosis. She said she could order a CT scan, one of the tests that had not been done yet, but that she would bet me \$50 that it was nothing more than bad eating habits. I didn't disagree with her about the eating habits but I did about the diagnosis.

Ten days later at 9:30 pm on a Thursday evening, my doctor called to tell me that yes; a baseball-sized mass had shown up in my lower chest on the CT film. Just as my brother-in-law was told, she said it could possibly just be an infected abscess but that I should get a second opinion and make an appointment to see an oncologist at a well-known university hospital near Chicago. The only word that stuck out in my mind in that conversation was the word "cancer."

By this time it was March 2002. Five months had passed and I was getting weaker and sicker by the day. I was in constant pain now instead of just when I would eat. I called the hospital and was told that the earliest I could get in to see the oncologist was 10 days. Once I saw him, he flew into the room followed by a herd of interns, slapped my CT film up on the wall, and said that yes; he was sure I had cancer. He just wasn't sure if it was lymphoma or pancreatic cancer. He then flew out of the room as quickly as he had come in.

The next step was to schedule a needle biopsy to get a sample of the mass. This took another week to get done. After two very painful attempts failed to retrieve enough of a sample for diagnosis, I was referred to the surgeon. Of course it took another week to see the surgeon, then another week to have the surgery. Since the tumor was wrapped around my aorta, it couldn't be completely removed, so instead a small portion was taken to determine staging. Ten days later after surgery, I still had not heard back from the doctor on what exactly I had. Finally I got in touch with the doctor and asked him if he had heard anything yet, and he said: "No. But if you hear anything, Rob, let me know."

I was devastated, exhausted, and getting weaker and sicker by the day. I knew that if it was cancer, it wasn't going to take the day off, stay home on the weekends, or go on vacation. And I still wasn't fighting it, just diagnosing it. That evening I was complaining to a friend about how slow everything was going. He told me that everyone I knew was going to tell me where to go, who to see, and what to take. He then gave me the number to Cancer Treatment Centers of America<sup>®</sup> (CTCA) in Zion, IL, where he had gone for treatment when he had cancer.

Now it was getting into late April 2002. I called CTCA and spoke to Doug White, an Oncology Information Specialist at the hospital. Doug patiently listened as I frantically told him of my situation. He took my insurance info and said he would call me back that afternoon. After what I had been through with the medical field at that time, I wasn't going to hold my breath waiting for that call. Within a few hours Doug actually called me back and said he would Fed Ex an info pack about CTCA to me and that I should be receiving it the next day. The next thing I'm going to say is the most important to me. When that truck pulled up the next morning I knew at that moment that CTCA was who I should be dealing with. Someone finally understood my "sense of urgency."

I called CTCA right away and made an appointment. The oncologist and care team wanted me to come in sooner than I could get there, which was nice for a change, but I needed to get my films and slides from the other hospital first, and couldn't get them until the end of the week. I called CTCA back in a few days in a panic because the other hospital had lost all of my films and slides and I wouldn't be able to replace them for at least another week. I was told not to worry. CTCA had all of the equipment needed to run the tests, and that I should keep my appointment because they felt I had lost enough time already. How refreshing that was to hear!

Within the next week, CTCA had done what had taken the other hospital weeks to accomplish. I was re-diagnosed, staged, given my options of how I could receive treatment for the stage II follicular non-Hodgkin's lymphoma I had, told what my prognosis was, and was assured that I was not alone in this fight. I was on a team now, of which I was the lead partner, and we were going to do everything possible to beat this disease.

My treatment consisted of six rounds of chemo called "CHOP" along with an immunotherapy drug called Rituximab over the next eight months followed by five weeks of daily radiation. At last I was physically fighting my cancer. It tried very hard to overtake me, but with the support I was receiving from my care team at CTCA, I knew I was going to win.

I have now been the "lead partner on the healing team of my health care management" for the past eight years. Through the guidance and support of my "team," I have become an excellent cancer fighter. I joined the CTCA Cancer Fighters<sup>®</sup> program, which has helped me to develop into the kind of cancer fighter I want to be. I am now an active Cancer Fighter Ambassador, helping other cancer fighting partners recognize their own strengths in their own personal fight. I speak at charity events, walk in marathons, participate in mountain hikes, and even sing a Pink Floyd song, TIME, at my fundraising events. Now that's a long way from where I was eight years ago, not knowing if my family was losing a father and husband. Most important of all is that I have learned how to be a good listener to others who are seeking insight on CTCA and its philosophy of healing. I have made many lifelong friends through the Cancer Fighters Thrive patient-to-patient network, and will stay involved until my last breath. I get to have an active part in actually saving someone else's life through all of the opportunities offered to me through CTCA.

Because of the philosophy that is cultivated throughout CTCA, I have been able to become an ambassador for hope, faith, and belief that just because someone tells you that you have cancer; it doesn't mean your days of greatness are over.

Thanks to CTCA for helping me realize that I have the ability to be enabled in life -- not disabled -- because of cancer.