Cancer Health™

Jay Elwell – Rotten Fruit

Jay Elwell wrote a book called *Rotten Fruit* in the aftermath of his testicular cancer experience to process and pay it forward.

November 13, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

Welcome to the Band of Ballers! In this series on ABSOT, I'm turning over control to some other ballsy testicular cancer survivors and patients who have inspired me with their work in advocacy and awareness during and after their diagnosis. This month's feature is all about Jay Elwell, who wrote a book about his experience. Enjoy!

At the age of twenty-nine, I found a bump on my testicle. Later on, I started to also feel some pain down there. It was mild at first but then became strong enough to force concern. I managed to put it off long enough.

On April 20th, 2012, I was "vaguely" diagnosed with testicular cancer. I say "vaguely" because my doctors couldn't tell me with any certainty what it actually was, but something definitely looked suspicious. There was indeed a mass on my left nut that shouldn't have been there and that was unanimously confirmed by all the medical professionals involved. Nobody could or would tell me what it was though, simply because they didn't quite know for themselves. The only surety was that it needed to hastily be removed.

For someone as deeply rooted in anxiety as I was/am, this was a less than ideal way for me to hear my initial prognosis.

Within a week of that half-hearted diagnosis, I was sedated and laid on a gurney to be flayed. My ball was removed from its scrotal domain and I was sent home to recover. It all happened so fast. I was numb. I never even managed to properly explain to my parents as to what was going on. They found out when my wife told them in the waiting room of the hospital. She told them everything we knew which admittedly wasn't much. I probably had cancer and that was it. I felt so overwhelmed with guilt and confusion for putting them through that.

The first few days after the surgery really sucked.

I was miserable. Taking a dump was nearly impossible for the first few days. I almost prayed for the looseness of diarrhea to help ease the discomforts of any bowel straining movements. I felt so bloated and uncomfortable, like I was ready to burst forth from every orifice at any given moment.

The incision was made just above my groin and right below my belly. That point of surgical entry was soon revealed to be problematic. I never realized how much those core muscles are used for the routine and simplistic tasks of everyday life. Walking the length of the living room to get to the kitchen for a snack was suddenly laborious. (Editor's Note: I feel this 100%.)

I felt like Andy Dufresne in the rain after escaping those shit filled sewers of Shawshank's prison once I was able to take a full-fledged shower for the first time. It was gloriously somber. I remember thinking about how much we as a species are potentially taking for granted as I reveled in the warmth of the water.

The days got easier as they rolled onward. I was feeling decent and eventually went back to work. That lasted for roughly a week.

Shortly after my return to normalcy, my life was turned upside down once again when I picked up that ringing phone.

The voice on the other end of the call told me it was indeed a cancerous growth that was discovered. It was also nonseminoma—a rarer variant of malignancy that historically was a little more adventurous when it came to systematically spreading its darkness throughout my internal plumbing.

I should have known better. Once it started to feel easy should've been my first omen.

A meeting with an oncologist (who also moonlighted as a beekeeper, which I've always found fascinating for some reason) took place soon after that call.

During that visit, he laid out the three treatment options available to me.

The first option was to just watch and wait. To be honest, this was very appealing at first, but I know myself and how I am. Knowing a small trace of whatever this was still could be inside me was something I couldn't live with.

The second option: an invasive surgery targeting my lymph nodes that would see me pinned down and dissected like some frog in a high school science class. I'd just been through the first major surgical event of my life and couldn't stomach the idea of enduring another one, especially since it didn't carry the odds of success I was looking for.

Lastly, a few rounds of an aggressive chemo cocktail designed to flush out any cancerous remnants within me was proposed. Never in a million years would I have imagined my twenty-nine-year-old frame sitting in an oncologist's office, rifling through various pamphlets, and weighing out the real-life pros and cons of cancer treatments. It was too unreal. I felt sick already.

I chose chemotherapy and it was all happening too fast.

Chemo was an absolute whirlwind. The process was nasty and relentless. Secretly, I wished for a sort of manual or guide that I could reference my ailments when I needed to. (Editor's Note: This is why I created “What to Expect When You’re Expecting Chemo”.)

Is this foggy feeling normal? Is this fever dangerous? Is it normal to get hemorrhoids during treatment? Up until that point in time, I thought of cancer as something only the old had to deal with and the very young tragically born into. It wasn’t on my radar as something that could affect me at this very juncture.

I felt betrayed by my body and devastated by the idea of my own eventual mortality. For some reason, I felt shame when I started losing hair. I can still almost feel those dreadful waves of nausea that I never knew my stomach capable of in the first place. It was a lot to process in a very short amount of time.

I held onto all of this for far too long. I never fully managed to talk about it in a real and honest way. I felt like a failure somehow, even all these years later. Everything was a punchline for a joke that wasn’t very funny to me, but I felt a need to present it a certain “manly” way. I was a mess for a long time until I had the idea to write my book, Rotten Fruit: My Testicular Cancer Adventure.

I wrote Rotten Fruit to help me get past this chapter of my life that just would not end.

I started writing this in March, right when the realities of the pandemic started to rear its ugly head. I was crazy with anxiety, aimless and all worked up over it all. I decided to turn something perceived as negative – both my environmental and past cancer experiences, into something positive that could do good for not only me, but anyone willing to give me a shot.

This book was my healing process. I take you on a journey with my voice, a stranger to most, to tell the reader about what makes me tick and how my anxiety has shaped me over the years. I talk about some of the physical and mental aspects of what being a cancer patient can be like. It’s not everyone’s story, but it’s mine and my only hope is to be of help to someone going through something similar.

Once I held my own story in my hands, I was finally able to turn the page for myself.

The only thing I regret is not finding my outlet sooner. I implore anyone going through the same thing to find their own means to heal. Talk to someone. Join a support group. Don’t be afraid to heal and know you are not alone with the thoughts that may be racing through your head. It is never too late to seek out the help you may need.

Our stories all start the same. It’s up to us as survivors to end them the right way.

Be sure to connect with Jay by visiting him at @jayelwell82. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

Know someone (or even yourself!) who is supporting TC awareness and would be willing to share their story? Drop their name, contact, and why they should be featured into this Google Form and I’ll reach out to them and/or you!

This post originally appeared on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor on September 23, 2020. It is republished with permission.
