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Writer's Take On Cancer Inspires

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Journal Southern Bureau

TRUTH or CONSEQUENCES—One year ago, Patrick "Patch" Rose thought he might not live to see today.

Rose, a 40-year-old reporter for The Herald weekly newspaper in T or C, was diagnosed on Nov. 4, 2005, with an aggressive form of brain tumor—glioblastoma multiforme (GBM).

Weeks later on Nov. 29, almost a year to the day after his mother's 2004 death from lung cancer, surgeons in a Phoenix hospital opened Rose's skull to remove the tumor growing on the left side of his brain.

But even with complete removal of the tumor and other treatment, the survival rate for GBM patients is low—less than 3 percent over five years, perhaps 30 percent over 2 years, with a median of 14 months after diagnosis, according to various studies.

What was a writer to do when confronted with his own mortality?

In Rose's case, write.

Post-surgical updates about his cancer struggles, e-mailed to family and friends, eventually evolved into a biweekly column for The Herald.

The column is called: "One Year to Live?: A Nobody's Guide to Surviving Cancer."

The column combines an unblinking look at life in the face of cancer with relentless humor and optimism. It documents his fears, his efforts to nurture good health and cultivate hope from chemotherapy drugs.

"The best thing for me is that, when I'm writing them, I crack up," Rose said during a recent interview at T or C's Happy Belly Deli. "So I know, OK, if I'm laughing about it, probably someone else is, too."

In "One Year," Rose has written about shunning a big temptation, sugar, so as not to feed the tumor's growth; about getting a tearful phone call from a stranger in New Jersey who thanked him for the columns, which she read online; about forcing down a vitamin-rich but nasty-tasting

powdered drink as part of a new health regimen; and about coping with late-night fears, and sometimes anger, about a possible early death.

Rose's last column featured an irreverent list of "possible causes" of cancer, including: "Being married to an X-ray tech ... ; Being married at all ... ; Being a New York Mets fan ... ; Cancer columns ... ; The desert. The mountains. The valleys. Earth, sky and sea."

With the one-year anniversary of his brain surgery fast approaching, Rose said he considered changing the column's title to: "Not Dead Yet."

The column has a loyal following, giving readers in the small town south of Elephant Butte Lake a unique and close-up look at a neighborhood drama with a universal theme— life and death.

Herald Editor Carlos Padilla was among the recipients of Rose's e-mailed updates, and the humor in them prompted Padilla to suggest a column.

"Here he had gone through this brain surgery and recovering from cancer, and I thought, gosh, if anyone can joke about this stuff, that's got to be inspirational to other people who are freaking out about it," Padilla said.

But readers say cancer patients are not the only ones inspired.

"He (Rose) readily admits it's a day-to-day situation. The prognosis from the get-go was not good," said Gerry Trumbull, owner of Parisi Fine Jewelry and Gallery, who said he looks forward to the columns. "It makes us all deal with our own mortality, and it also reminds us that it's a day-to-day situation for everybody, whether we have cancer or not."

Elephant Butte municipal clerk Mary Ann Dix, who deals with Rose in a professional capacity, said her 72-year-old husband has been coping with lung cancer since August. "And it's really uplifting to see someone like Patch who was given a year to live, to see his attitude," Dix said.

Rose's columns, she said, "are both funny and bring tears to your eyes."

Rose, a Brooklyn, N.Y. native, landed in T or C in May 2003, when his wife, Sylvia, an X-ray technician, took a job here after one in Seattle fell through. After working at the other weekly newspaper here, the Sierra County Sentinel, as a proofreader and reporter, Rose was hired as a reporter at The Herald in June 2005.

Five months later, after slurred speech, transposed words and other symptoms surfaced, Rose learned he had a brain tumor.

The Herald began publishing "One Year to Live?" in March.

Rose's last CAT scan, in September, showed very positive results. The next one is scheduled for December, and Rose approaches that with some anxiety and lots of hope.

From the beginning, he has viewed the cancer with a resolute determination to survive.

"I went in whole hog the day of the surgery: 'I'm going in to beat this thing' " Rose said.

Rose said that through his columns, he has tried to give others hope that they can beat the illness. But, he said, if his own condition worsens, he will try to "live with grace and with hope and do the things that someone needs to do to have a memorable life."

Before writing the column, Rose said he had often wondered about his role in life.

After graduating from Syracuse University, he acted in stage productions from New York City to Philadelphia between 1986 and 1995. He spent the next five years working as a lounge singer in Lisbon, Portugal, and, briefly, in Amsterdam. When he returned to New York, he took up an old love, writing— a fictional version of his mother's life, a baseball screen play, children's books.

"The most interesting thing about what's happened is— this is it," Rose said. "Was acting it? No. Singing it? No. I thought writing was it. This is it— being a cancer victim, being a cancer survivor, being able to write these columns and tell people what this experience is. I always wondered what my purpose in life was and this is it.

"Because every day someone gets told, 'You've got a year to live,' and I want them to find this column so they can see, OK, in the first place, they might be wrong. And, in the second place, if I go in December and they find three more tumors, and I only did get a year, it's a hell of a year."

Quick Takes

Excerpts from "One Year to Live? A Nobody's Guide to Surviving Cancer," a column in The Herald, by Patch Rose.

"A shocking and surprising seizure on a Thursday morning turned out to be the result of some light social weekend drinking. ... I've turned into Jerky McTwitchalot. Toss me into a tub full of cold water, add some dirty laundry and you're all set."

"Having a baby alien eat its way through your brain is not such a bad thing, at least not during the day. There are, after all, so many distractions. The 'Desperate Housewives' DVD. The newest Harry Potter book, 675 pages of diversion. Your wife's laugh, the purr of your tomcat, the

bark of the dog at a passing truck. All these things help you forget the very real battle going on inside your skull, between the killing tumor and the half-brain you started out with, now reduced to a quarter."

"Late last week, a friend complimented me on my recent weight loss. He asked how much weight I'd dropped; thirty pounds, I said. 'Atkins or South Beach?' he asked. 'GBM brain tumor,' I replied. 'Best diet in the world. You either lose all your excess weight or die trying.' "

"What I'm really afraid of is dying. And that's what's making me angry. But that's okay. Only the living feel anger. Only the living experience fear. ... Only the living can grow, and change. Only the living can forgive, and only the living can love. And so, every day becomes a challenge. Every day my damaged brain is filled with questions. 'Are you growing? Are you changing? Are you doing what you must to survive? Do you forgive? Do you love?' Or are you dead already?"

Samples of Rose's cancer columns are online at www.patchrose.com.

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