

FROM THE ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL:

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TorC Columnist Gears Up for 2nd Cancer Fight

By Leslie Linthicum, Journal Staff Writer

TRUTH or CONSEQUENCES — It had been a while since Patch Rose, a columnist for the local T or C Herald newspaper, had filed an update on his battle against brain cancer. Why tempt fate when the news was so good? It had been nearly three years since he was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme, an aggressive, incurable brain cancer known as GBM.

After treatment, Rose was very much alive and his quarterly MRIs were showing a clean noggin'. His series of Herald columns about living a life with an expiration date — One Year to Live? — had been published as a book, and Rose was happily back at work on the more mundane stories of small-town school board meetings and art shows.

Then on Aug. 4, Rose filed this update:

"I can't believe I have to take this cancer trip a second time. What stop did I miss the first time? Can I just get the postcard? I was THIS close to graduation from Cancer U., only to find out I'm being held back. And I don't even know why. Did I fail P.E.? Did my transcript get lost in the mail? I thought I'd graduated from GBM school Summa Cum Laude; instead, it's 'Lawdy, how come?'"

So, damn it. Back to Cancer 101. The basics. What's the most basic, fundamental lesson I have learned from my cancer experience?

Don't open suppository wrappers with your teeth."

Okay. But after that?

Miracles Are Coming.

Heck, they're already here."

One of those miracles, Rose explained over breakfast in TorC a week ago, was that he would fight to live another day. After surgery, radiation and chemotherapy that lasted for two years; after being handed a death sentence and doing the hard work of making his peace with it; and then, after allowing himself to believe he might actually live, Rose didn't think he could face the brain tumor fight again.

Rose, who turns 42 next week, explains his thoughts about dying: "I've been ready for a while, because they said I wasn't going to be here. It's not that I want to go, it's just that I'm not afraid. Either would be all right. My attitude was, it was supposed to be a year, it's now been almost three. I don't want to be greedy."

Rose's wife, Cookie, listens, and her hand shakes as she raises her coffee cup. It's harder for her.

They met in New York, in a Brooklyn church where Cookie was first soprano in the choir. They've been married for seven years, and it's a tight union. Rose's wedding ring is tattooed on his finger.

"We had talked about this for a long time, what we would do if this came back," Cookie said. "I get upset because I don't want to lose him, but I also don't want him to be here and not to be able to function and do the things he enjoys doing."

Then there was the matter of money. He and Cookie had blown through their savings and more on the first tumor. After the 80-20 split with their health insurance provider and drugs and travel and co-pays, they were out close to \$50,000. Now neither of them had jobs — brain surgery has jumbled Rose's recall and writers can't write when the words won't come, and Cookie's years as a caregiver had left her mentally and physically

exhausted and on a medical leave from her job as an X-ray tech. With no health insurance and no money, Rose was ready to throw in the towel and let GBM settle the score.

A few days after he was re-diagnosed, Rose took his MRI pictures along, and he and Cookie went into town for the monthly art gallery hop. Better let their friends know the bad news right away, he thought, and let the grieving begin. "All I was hoping for was solace, and prayers," Rose said.

A day later, phones were ringing, e-mails were bouncing and artists were organizing a benefit auction to raise money to fund Rose's fight. And it grew and grew. A restaurant lending its space. An auctioneer pitching in his services. And more than 100 people donating — everything from oil paintings to golf clubs to spa weekends to a microwave.

"Patch laid the groundwork for this to be a success," says Ruanna Waldrum, owner of a frame and art supply business in TorC, who helped organize the benefit. "It's because of him that everyone got on board."

The auction raised \$12,000, a nice amount for a rural county of less than 13,000 people. More is needed to keep up the fight, and donations are being accepted via PayPal at www.patchrose.com and addressed to Patch Rose at the TorC Herald, 1204 N. Date, TorC, NM 87901.

Rose has spent the last three years focusing on his health, examining his life and writing it all down in dispatches filed with optimism and warmth. Now he's humbled that all that goodness is washing back on him.

"There are two things going on here and the less important thing is me," Rose says. "It's just amazing. People from all over the county, people from Hillsboro all the way practically down to Hatch, getting involved. I didn't realize how many people were listening."

Rose flew to Phoenix and had his second surgery. He's got a big scar across his bald head, he's started chemotherapy again and he has trouble finding the right words on occasion. He has no trouble articulating this: "The most important thing is that these people have gotten together and given us hope."

Rose has been concentrating lately on a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "To know that even one person has breathed a little easier because you have lived; This is to have succeeded."

Rose knows from the phone calls and notes in response to his columns that he can chalk up his life as a success. And so he is ready to go. But the people in Truth or Consequences aren't ready to let him.

Rose's most recent column ended this way:

"A week ago, I was planning my funeral. Today, thanks to friends, I'm studying my old test papers, relearning the moves of the cancer chess board, and, strangest of all to me, I'm making a vow to all of my miracle workers, a vow I intend to keep: I promise you, I am going to graduate this time."

Book Excerpts From "One Year To Live?":

From "One Year":

Awake.

Staring at ceiling. Beeps. Flickers. Nausea.

Wow. Good shit, bro. Is it legal?

Where am I?

Ah.

Sudden clarity. Post-op. They've cut open my head. Pulled out a wriggling, evil and hungry THING. Sliced it apart. Disposed of it. Re-sewed on my sawed off head. And sent me—here.

I am still here. Holy shit.

But how am I?

I take inventory. Blink. Swivel the eyes, the head. Ouch. Sore noggin. I bring my left hand to my left temple. Long string of metal staples running down my scalp. Okay. A zipper on the outside of my head; an egg-sized cavity inside. Cool. My wife has a new purse.

What about my right side? Surgeon said the cutting could paralyze that side.

Deep breath. Command right toes to wiggle.

Piggies wiggle.

Right leg swivels. Right fist clenches, each finger cascades in sequence. Bird finger still works. Excellent, excellent. Right shoulder swivels, in fact, everything works.

Thank you, sweet baby Jesus.

From "Miracles are Coming":

My post-cancer life is like a major motion picture. Some days have great joy: desert rainstorms, a pair of barking Chihuahuas, my wife's smile.

Some days contain tremendous agony: a mailbox stuffed with medical bills, the crushing fatigue of chemotherapy, the jangly stress of a press deadline. But always, always, my life is a great adventure.

Perhaps my life was always this way, but it took cancer to get me to see it. So, maybe, just maybe, cancer itself is a miracle? God only knows what tomorrow will bring. Perhaps life, maybe death. Either way, my answer to the heartsick souls on the telephone line always remains the same.

Miracles are coming.

From "The Wearing of the Greens":

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. "You either lose all your excess weight or die trying."

From "Beating the Day Terrors":

Because, you see, what I'm really afraid of is dying. Just like you. And that's what's making me angry.

Just like you.

But it's okay. Only the living feel anger. Only the living feel fear. And only the living—you and I—can do something about it. Like writing hate mail. Or submitting silly little cancer columns filled with strange, puffy words like "insouciant."

Or reading them.

Only the living can grow, and change. Only the living can forgive, and only the living can love. So, every day becomes a challenge. Every day 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?

From "How to Beat the Night Terrors":

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 latest Scarlett Johansson DVD. The new Harry Potter book, 700 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.

But, at night? After the news has declared without hesitation that indeed things are much worse than they seem, the urge to surrender, to take every one of the little pink pills you got from the druggist and to sleep forever is quite irresistible. For it seems pointless to go on; night has fallen and there is no hope of sunrise.

You lay there, in the grave of night, cool beads pooling on your forehead, thinking about the future. You don't just selfishly think of yourself; images and memories of all who went before you sweep the dark ceiling. The smiles of the beloved, who fought and struggled and tried and lost, these crash into images of the beloved you will leave behind. It seems you've lived all your life without a clue, and now, still clueless, you're left to fight and struggle and try and lose, and wander, bewildered and alone.

Not much fun.

From "Cancer is Just Another Word for Life":

Truth was, I had finally become a man. I had faced my own D-Day; I'd stormed the beaches of Cancer nation. I'd toughed out the daily slog of survival: the pills, the exercise, the radiation and the chemo, the hope and fear, the triumph and the worry.

Now, I was finally a man, a man aware that all of it could end tomorrow, so I'd best be true to myself and make the most of today.

So perhaps 'Cancer' is just another word for 'Life.' Perhaps so are the words 'Diabetes,' 'AIDS,' 'Heart Disease.' Maybe these words provide a map for one's life, a compass. A flashlight.

Maybe these words define a way of living that is truly living, not waiting, or fearing. Or dying.

So, with my new cancer flashlight and my ol' best girl by my side, I'm living.

I'm not waiting,

I'm not fearing and I'm not holding back in any way.

I'm moving ahead.

And afraid of the dark am I not.

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