

Chapter 14: Climbing Together

Woody Hubbell

Woody Hubbell suffered from cancer during his college studies. He stresses the outstanding care he received and the remarkable support and accompaniment that he enjoyed from healthcare professionals, friends, and family members. Care is more than a diagnostic prowess, a high-tech diagnosis, an up-to-date pharmacological arsenal, and a targeted therapy. Care is also shaped by competent and dedicated caregivers, loving family members, and supportive friends.

December 14, 2017. I remember it like it was yesterday. It is very cliché to say this, but it really does not feel that long ago. I was studying for my accounting final in Walsh Hall at Boston College when one of my roommates walked in. “Hey Woody, the RD [Resident Director] wants you to report to health services as soon as possible.” “Weird,” I thought, “I wonder what this could be.” I had gone into health services two weeks earlier and had been diagnosed with strep throat. I was taking antibiotics for it, but when those ran out, I immediately felt sick again. Once again, I visited health services, and the doctor did not know what was going on, so he conducted a blood test and told me he would get back to me in two-three days. Well, now it was two days later, and I was getting my results.

As I walked to health services, I thought to myself “I have no idea what this could be, but whatever it is, maybe it could get me out of finals.” I walked in the building and was immediately placed in a room. Shortly after the doctor came in to speak with me. I will never forget what he said, “The white blood cell count of a normal person is about 10,000, your white cell count is 300,000. Looking at your platelets, the number for a normal person is 150,000 to 450,000. Yours is 9,000, low enough to the point where if you got a bloody nose right now, I do not know if I would be able to stop it.”

Wow. I began feeling pretty uncomfortable as you could imagine (especially since earlier that week I had a bloody nose that lasted about three hours). He told me these numbers were similar to that of a leukemia patient. I felt like I had been hit by a truck for about four seconds. After that, I decided I was going to beat this thing. The doctor asked me if I had any friends who would be willing to go to Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) with me to get further testing done. "Great, this guy thinks I have cancer and no friends who want to go to the hospital with me either," I thought. Luckily, my roommate Peter was available and made the trip with me.

The next few days consisted of a lot of medical tests, tons of phone calls, and one final diagnosis, Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. At this point, I had accepted that I had blood cancer, but I had hoped it was Hodgkin's lymphoma because that is the type of cancer Eric Berry of the Kansas City Chiefs had. Since we are both superior athletes, I figured it would be cool to have the same kind of cancer.

When I was first diagnosed, I was abruptly removed from my life as a college student and placed into cancer patient world. It was also ten days before Christmas. I was scared but thankfully not lonely. I was allowed as many visitors as could fit in the room. The sounds of my friend's voices watching football calmed me and lulled me to sleep. My family came to Boston and spent the entire week celebrating Christmas in my hospital room. We all consider it our favorite Christmas because everyone was together, just living in the moment and appreciating all that life had given us. I spent the next month in the hospital. My friends and mom were by my side the entire time. Being able to have the physical presence and connection with my family and friends aided me in my emotional journey with cancer treatment and possibly in turn with my physical recovery. I feel for the new patients diagnosed during the COVID global pandemic. I understand the unique problems COVID-19 poses. Hopefully conversations started regarding future health risks and how to keep the patients' emotional health foremost in their treatment plans.

I began a month of inpatient treatment with my doctor, Marlise R. Luskin, at BWH followed by a three-month clinical trial of inotuzumab. I

had many visits from friends and family, as well as professors and a man who would become a great friend, Fr. Tony Penna. Tony works as the BC Men's Hockey chaplain and also teaches a theology class at BC, which I took last year (no Father Tony, I do not hold a grudge against you for only giving me an A-).

I took a medical leave of absence from BC and went back home to Minnesota for the following few months. Living at home was tough during this time because there was so much going on at BC that I missed. I missed my friends going on spring break, missed Marathon Monday, and missed ESPN's College Gameday at BC against Clemson. That left me with a bittersweet feeling since I had followed the team incredibly closely, had multiple friends on the team, and my one college football dream was to go to Gameday at BC (other than when the BC football coach Jeff Hafley takes us to the Playoff). I had also missed my girlfriend, Carlisle, run the New York City marathon in my honor, as she had raised over \$9,000 for the American Cancer Society. Watching so much life happen while I was at home was exciting and a bit saddening. I could not help but feel a little left behind. My friends lifted my spirits by passing a #WoodyStrong banner around to different college campuses, letting me know that they stood with me. All in all, it was tough being away, but my friends, family, and the BC community made me feel that I was loved.

It was not all bad. I got to watch my brother's senior high school football season as they made it to the state championship. I would talk in the stands with my uncles, dad, and brothers about how the players on the field should be acting more like Tim Riggins and then come home for a great meal prepared by my mom. I worked with a great team at the University of Minnesota as well. I am grateful that Boston and Minnesota are the two places I received care since there are not many spots in the world to find better healthcare.

I came back to BC a year later, finishing up my sophomore year having missed just two semesters. I was incredibly nervous, but the semester began feeling somewhat regular. Early on in my first semester back, I went to mass on upper campus with my girlfriend. It was being presided by Fr. Tony, and I was excited to say hello. He gave me a wave at the beginning and

looked incredibly happy to see me there. He celebrated a great mass, and at the end, he gave me a quick shoutout, saying I had been through a lot, and asked everyone to give me a warm welcome back. People started clapping as I gave a little wave and felt very much back into the swing of things at BC. Carlisle and I walked back to my room after mass, and I really did not say much. Once we got to my room she asked if I was feeling ok since I was acting quiet and had an odd look on my face. I immediately burst into tears. How on Earth did I get so lucky to be surrounded by so many great people? What did I do to deserve this? That simple gesture was all I needed to realize that the people in my life are special, and I was absolutely not in this alone. God is great, God is effing great.

During that semester, another time I felt lucky to be back was when I was hanging out at 282 Foster Street, where some buddies of mine lived. I was nervous to be living alone and wondered if I could handle the transition back into school after a year off. People were just moving back for the semester, and my friend Hugh had just arrived. I had gotten to know him a good bit early during our sophomore year, but I did not know him incredibly well. When he walked in, he was surprised to see me. He said, “Woody it is great to have you back man, just know you are always welcome here.” Since then, I have become much closer with Hugh, but at the time, I thought how genuine that was. It really hit me how much people care. I have never told him how much that simple “you are always welcome here” meant to me in my transition back. It was that much more comforting since about half of my friends had gone abroad in my first semester back. Thinking back on it, it is wild how much of a difference those five words made and helped put my mind at ease.

After that, I had convinced myself “I can do this, no problem.” I mainly hung out at the BC Rose Garden and at Foster Street and had an awesome time that semester. I got to visit friends in Madrid, I got back into club baseball, helping the team to its first ever world series bid, and I made a bunch of new friends in Chestnut Hill. The next year was just as fun, if not more. All my friends abroad came back acting like they were changed people, and it was their senior year so that was exciting as well.

My treatment at Dana Farber and the University of Minnesota continued, but all went well. I lived as a faux senior for that year, as all my friends were set to graduate, but I had another year. I was unsure what this year would look like, but I was also excited. I was able to meet an idol of mine, Mark Herzlich, who is a former BC football great linebacker who was diagnosed with cancer while in school like me. I briefly told him my story and how he was an inspiration to me and got a photo with him. Overall, the year was awesome even with it being cut short due to COVID. At the end of the year, Billy, a buddy of mine through baseball, asked me to live with him and his friends for my real senior year. I had never met any of them, but once again, I was luckier than ever because they have become great friends of mine as well.

It is hard to discuss going to the hospital on a frequent basis and leave out the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic threw a wrench into the system of providing care around the world and hit patients especially hard. With so many new precautions taken and strict new protocols, most hospitals would only allow the patient to come in for treatment. Before the pandemic, I would typically go to the hospital with my girlfriend or my mom. It was nice having company in the hospital because they were great at making me comfortable. As one could guess, going to chemotherapy appointments with loved ones makes it almost feel easy. However, with the new protocols due to COVID-19, I was making trips to the hospital alone. Even with this change, I consider myself lucky for a few reasons. I was able to build up a familiar relationship with my nurses and doctor by this point. Since I had already been receiving treatment for two and a half years, I had a great relationship with my medical team and was able to catch up with them when I would make solo trips to the hospital. I am lucky to have a team I was able to be comfortable around because this made my appointments during COVID-19 much easier to get through. I know that not everyone else can say that.

Balancing treatment, school, and social life is definitely weird, but I made it work. I would go to appointments on a monthly basis with my girlfriend, on some occasions getting sick and making her act as my nurse (my mom had this duty when I lived at home). I was able to go to football

tailgates and keep up with schoolwork. I have become the go-to to talk about spinal taps and bone marrow biopsies with my grandma, Punkin, who has also begun receiving them. I have three brothers and two sisters, and there is a good bit of friendly sarcasm in my family, so talking about my cancer has not been a problem there.

Some people would ask me more timidly regarding my health. Since I was diagnosed at 19 while in college, my friends were along for the journey. There were some moments of loneliness, mostly because I was removed from normal life. My friends did not make cancer a lonely process for me. I am now 23 and working. A friend of mine who is my age was recently diagnosed with lymphoma. I went to lunch with him, and we talked about what cancer and treatment is like. I am happy he was comfortable talking to me and thankful I could offer him support. A cancer diagnosis is scary, but you do not need to be lonely. Sharing on my cancer is a great opportunity to open up conversation, and I am honored to being a part of it.

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Woody Hubbell graduated from Boston College in 2021, majoring in finance and entrepreneurship with a minor in history. In 2017, he was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia and began a three-year treatment process at Boston's Dana Farber Cancer Institute. Today, he lives in Minneapolis and works at the investment bank and financial services company Piper Sandler, within their healthcare group.