

PERSEVERA and Positivity



"There's nothing like being twenty-nine and getting told you only have six months left to live,"

Doug Hamilton says over the phone, his voice rich with the dramatic irony of the situation. You can almost picture him smiling.

"Nothing like it. But here I am, alive forty-three years later. I'm 72 now."

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Doug Hamilton's story is a remarkable one. In 1971, he was faced with an impossibly difficult decision. Upon the discovery of a large tumour in his right leg, he was given the option to have an extensive amputation, which would leave him without his right leg, thigh and hip, or else undergo a potentially difficult surgery to remove his hamstring and sciatic nerve.

"I asked my doctor which option would give be the better chance of survival. He said neither. So I thought, I may as well keep my leg."

Additionally, he was told, he would need a leg brace to walk for the remainder of his now greatly shortened life.

In many ways, Doug was very lucky – his charismatic nature helped him to immediately bond with a new young surgeon at his hospital, Dr. Don Morrow, who provided him with amazing support and treatment.

"Don offered to send me out of town for treatment. But I figured I'm in a little town, I know the people in this town, and if I'd left I never would have had a single visitor during recovery. So I asked Don if he thought he could do the surgery himself, and he said sure."

Doug was operated on three times by Dr. Don Morrow at the Queen Victoria Hospital in Revelstoke, British Columbia. His hamstring muscle and sciatic nerve were removed, and a biopsy was performed.

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The results were harrowing: Dr. Morrow informed Doug that he had a malignant neurofibrosarcoma – an incredibly rare diagnosis, as only 7% of that particular type of tumour are found to be malignant.

Doug remains grateful to Dr. Morrow today. "If Don hadn't been at the hospital, I doubt very much I'd be alive," he admits. "He's a wonderful man, and a wonderful surgeon."

As for the 29-year-old Doug, even a terminal illness couldn't extinguish his fiery spirit. "I did the inevitable while I was in the hospital," he admits, somewhat sheepishly. "I fell in love with one of my nurses. We dated for a short time, and then she broke up with me."

Doug spent around 60 days in the hospital after his operation. He owned a small service shop at the time, and was eager to get back to work – even if he was under orders not to.

"I don't know for sure, but to be honest I think the doctors thought I'd never leave the hospital. But one day I asked, 'Can I go home doc?' And off I went."

Maybe he was feeling lucky from his speedy recovery, but Doug decided to enter a local radio contest to win a bus trip to Lake Tahoe. And perhaps Doug was overdue for the odds to be in his favour – he won the contest.

"So I went on the trip, and I had a riot, as one would if they thought they didn't have long to live.

It was fantastic. But my leg brace kept breaking. Back at home I would fix it myself in the service shop, but on the trip I got stuck of it. I cut it off, threw it up on the rack on the bus and forgot about it up there."

"Actually, I don't know what eventually happened to it," he muses. "It probably ended up in the trash."

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And so, in spite of the doctors' predictions, Doug had already defied the odds: he was walking freely, without the help of a brace.

Even now, Doug's strength is so evident that one can hardly doubt that his survival and success has been contingent upon his upbeat attitude and relentless optimism:

"I remember thinking to myself, 'This is not going to beat me,'" Douglas recalls. "I'm 100% a strong believer in the power of positive thought."

Today, he spread this optimism to others fighting cancer. "I offer cancer counselling, and that's one of the things I always say to people: 'Tell yourself you're going to beat this.' Sometimes you're bang on, and sometimes you're not. Cancer is a horrible disease. But you must stay positive."

Beyond his work as a cancer counsellor, Doug's years spent battling NF have enabled him to better support and benefit his community. In particular, he has formed a cancer support group that meets in Revelstoke at the Hillcrest Hotel on the first Tuesday of every month. These meetings perfectly exemplify the true spirit and support that cancer patients receive and offer to each other within the Revelstoke community.

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he hotel managers really take care of us. We all have a free chocolate moose, and we celebrate whoever has a birthday that given month," he explains.

The support group works to fund-raise for members undergoing cancer treatment. Specifically, it tries to mitigate the financial burden caused on patients that have to commute to other hospitals, due largely to the fact that chemotherapy is no longer available at Revelstoke's Queen Victoria hospital.

"We raise funds for members to go to other hospitals and get treatment. Every now and again someone will get a rare cancer and have to travel far, and we help them with cash from our club. Sometimes its to Edmonton or Vancouver for extensive treatment. Other times, we pay for a driver to take people to appointments in Salmon Arms, Kelowna..."

"We've been trying to get chemotherapy treatment back into our hospital," Doug explains. "Our MLA, NDP Norm Macdonald – a wonderful man – has been doing everything he can. He will do anything to help anyone, regardless of their politics. He's one of those people."

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It is clear that Doug himself is 'one of those people', and a true pillar of support within his community. Despite his constant gratitude and humility, it is evident through his stories that his work continues to make a real and crucial difference to others fighting the disease.

"If you live in a town like this you've got to do something to give back. I've done a lot of things here that I probably never would have done if I lived in a bigger city. And after tomorrow night's fundraiser, the club should hopefully be good for money for a couple years."

The fundraiser he's referring to is a sit-down dinner and silent auction held at the Saturday night bingo on September 20th. "We got about 95% of the businesses in town involved in the auction. We've never done this type of event before. It should be a fun night."

"My good friend, Wayne Wood, was recently diagnosed with intestinal cancer. I'm hoping that with tomorrow's fundraising we'll have enough money to really help him out with the treatment."

"The club keeps growing- there's always someone getting cancer," he notes.

Of course, life with NF still presents challenges for Doug. Recently, he's had 8 larger lumps removed. Luckily, they've all be benign. He is health conscientious and takes great care in maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle:

"I went to see a Naturopathic doctor. Turns out I'm allergic to whole wheat, eggs," he says, "So I take care to not eat those things. And I walk every day."

"After all, I'm 72 now. I have been a Cancer survivor for 43 years. Not bad, for someone who was once told they had six months to live." ■

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LOOKING FOR ON-LINE SUPPORT?

Connect with others living with NF at inspire.com

Inspire is a site that provides a safe and secure place to support and connect with others.

Highly recommended by those who use it!

Inspire
together we're better