Article Series Inspirational Stories

Fred’s story: Making cancer the punchline

3 min read
Like (0) Likes
Bookmark
Share
Print

View Video Transcript

[Fred] You have a little soul inside you. It's a pilot light. Everyone has it.

And you have to be true to that pilot light of what you are uniquely meant for and shaped for, and to be dedicated to it and to sacrifice for it and it rewards you.

It doesn't come easily, though.

I've had cancer three times. I had it first when I was 28, testicular. Then I got it again four years ago.

And then, last July, I found out that I had esophageal cancer, and I went, "OK." At 28, I made a decision to quit my job.

I came out to California without any kind of future, all running on fumes, to go back and do stand-up again and went to the open mics to try to find myself.

People always ask me about gloves, boxing gloves. They go, "Are you a boxer?" And I go, "No. This is a fight."

[Nurse] One, two, three.

[Fred winces]

[Nurse] All right, diggety done. Just gotta transfer your tubes.

[Fred] OK. People on that highway of life- every six months to a year, I have to pull up to a tollgate.

And I'm in a CT scan and I wait for the results and wait for that gate to come up so I can get back on the road.

And I just have to hope that, when I go through the CT scan, that it's a happy ending of continuance. It happens tomorrow.

You kinda get the verdict. You're sitting there. Is the jury in? And you look, and man, you're looking for that oncologist and you're hoping they're smiling.

You know, the results could be devastating.

I'm gonna tell some jokes. Gonna talk about-I'll be up the stage, and I'll tell people I had a CT scan and try to come up with a CT scan joke, and then I'll ask for their support. I'll say, "I'm going for the scan tomorrow. "I'm going for a result, and I would appreciate your support."

And I'll take whatever emotion they give me to keep cancer away from me.

[Announcer] We're gonna bring up your next comic. Please welcome the very talented Fred Reiss.

Come on up, Fred. [audience applauds]

[Fred] Thank you. Thank you. My name's Fred Reiss. I'll start and tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a three-time cancer survivor. [audience applauds]

Yeah. Thank you, thank you. When I was going through chemo, I was pale, I was bald, and no one felt sorry for me because they thought I was a vegan.

[audience laughs] I almost died three times to say that joke. Give me a break.

[audience laughs] Where are your souls, people? Where are your souls?

[audience applauds] I don't feel I have cancer when I'm on the stage.

I'm completely Fred. I'm no longer the guy who has cancer. I'm the guy who's talking about cancer.

The thing that was incredibly satisfying about it is instead of people saying I was funny, they would come out of the shows and they were emotionally moved and I had inspired them, which I never anticipated.

[Fan] Lost mother to cancer, father, sister-so many people, so anybody that's still here... Thank you. God bless, man.

[Fred] God bless you. I have to walk in here and get a verdict, waiting to hope that she comes in smiling.

And then if she's not, then to see where I go, if something spread or I have to go through chemo again.

Hey!

[Doctor] Hello! How is it going, Fred?

[Fred] Good. I'm semi-optimistic. You're smiling.

[Doctor] Yeah, I'm smiling. [laughs]

[Fred] All right, okay.

[Doctor] Yeah, no, the scan looked really good. It looked good. Yeah. No, I'm very, very pleased.

[Fred] I'm excited for the opportunity to know that I'm gonna be around, that this world is not gonna be taken away from me and that I could add more intensity to it and maybe even improve it.

I always tell people, I say, "You know, I've been given the chance to play the role of a lifetime, and it turned out to be me." That's what I think.

Wow, look at that. Role of a lifetime-me. I got something to say. I matter, and it's bigger than me.

And I could be the hero for other people and myself that I always admired. I could be that guy.

FRED R.
LIVING WITH CANCER SINCE 1991

Fred makes people laugh for a living. But this wasn't always so. Years ago, at the age of 28, Fred was a journalist for a small newspaper in Connecticut. At that time, he decided to quit his job, move to California and follow his dream of becoming a stand-up comic. The reason? Cancer. Testicular cancer.

> Cancer is a catalyst. You have a pilot light of talent and spirit, and you have to decide what to do with it.

And so Fred began his lifelong journey as a comedian, writer and cancer veteran. After several years on the comedy circuit, he developed quite the stage presence, becoming what he refers to as an ‘insult comic.' "You know, I was one of those guys making fun of this, making fun of that." But after many years of touring, he felt that something was missing from his approach to humor. "I just wasn't finding the soul in it."

Cancer as catalyst: Part II

In 2011, almost 30 years after his initial diagnosis, Fred received a second great shock: his testicular cancer had returned, and it had metastasized to his lymph nodes. After enduring more than four months of chemotherapy and finally surgery, Fred did what comes naturally to him. He began trying to make sense of the experience by finding ways to laugh at it. "You know, I clawed and I struggled. I cried. And I fought for this life. I have something to share!"

Article slides



Fred makes cancer his punchline.



Fred shows off his best boxing stance.



Fred prepares for a CT scan at the clinic.



Fred's signature boxing gloves and a few books.



Fred in the backyard of his Santa Cruz home.



Fred takes the stage.

While in recovery, Fred began working on new comedy material, looking at this difficult experience and finding the humor in it. PET scans, chemotherapy, HMOs—it was all fair game. "If you can laugh, then you're bigger than the situation." Fred found that not only was laughter cathartic, but it also helped him take control of a stressful situation. It was a way to not let cancer define him and to keep the part of his identity that's most important to him.

> What you have to let define you is the spirit that got you through the battle. That's the thing that cancer can't touch.

Through comedy, Fred has found a way to share that spirit with others. "Before I started talking about cancer on stage, people would come up and say, ‘Hey man, you're really funny.' But now, they come up and say, ‘Wow, I was really moved by what you said.' There's a look in their eyes like they have been stirred." Today, at Fred's shows, you can feel the positive energy of the crowd. From the moment he

introduces himself as a cancer survivor, people roar and holler and are with him for every moment.

> If you do it right, you're powered by the love of other people around you. It gives you a strength you'd never have found by yourself.

Esophageal Cancer

In 2016, Fred learned he had cancer for a third time. This time? Esophageal cancer. But being a veteran, he knew just what to do. He gathered up all of his determination and brought it to the fight. That year, he underwent two rounds of chemotherapy and a difficult surgery but never lost his power to laugh or to bring laughter to others.

These days, Fred brings his unquenchable energy directly to cancer patients through his series of '*FRED Talks*.' He does them at hospitals and chemotherapy centers. His words, stories and insights help people laugh and inspire them to find strength, courage and a shared sense of purpose in the battles they face.

> I'm still staying true to what I believe in. And I actually believe it saved my life. The fact is, I know I've made a difference. And I'm happy.