

Tom Willner: “I Got Life and Life is Good”

Next August on his 36th birthday, Tom Willner hopes to be able to erase the final item on the “To Do” list he and his wife Allyson made when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

Along with items as mundane as “clean out the garage” and as life-changing as “have children,” the most important item has always been “cure cancer” and it’s the only thing remaining.

If everything goes well between now and then, in August, Willner will reach that magical five-year milestone after completing treatment where he is considered cured.

It was on his 30th birthday, almost exactly a year after his father died of prostate cancer, that Willner, director of information delivery for the American Cancer Society, discovered a lump on his testicle, which turned out to be cancer.

“I was less than half my father’s age. This was not something that was supposed to happen to me. I worked for the American Cancer Society and saw information about the disease on a daily basis but I was in denial. When I finally realized what I was dealing with, I freaked out,” he said.

Willner underwent surgery to remove the testicle and lymph nodes in his abdomen.

“The lymph nodes were clear and after I had completely recuperated from the surgery, we thought we were done,” he said.

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Three months later, a CT scan showed a mass in his lung that turned out to be malignant. He and his doctors at Winship Cancer Institute decided on a very aggressive treatment—four rounds of chemotherapy.

“Chemotherapy was a terrible experience but through it all, the infusion center nurses were angels,” he said.

Before Tom’s diagnosis, the Willners had been talking about having children. Because the surgery and treatment for testicular cancer could threaten his ability to have children, Willner deposited his sperm at a fertility clinic.

His wife got pregnant before his surgery and miscarried during his treatment but the story has a happy ending. The Willners now have two children, Klara, age 4 and Elliot, age one, both conceived through in-vitro fertilization using the sperm that Tom donated.

Willner has been a musician since he was very young. He and his friend Ben Wakeman formed Screen Door, a band that has a wide local following and performs at clubs and community events.

It was natural that he would turn to music for therapy during his recovery.



“While I was recovering from treatment, I went through an identity crisis. I started writing in a journal and writing songs about my experiences. For the first time in my life, the songs stated to pour out,” he said.

Willner came up with an idea for a musical, “Turning Thirty” about his experiences with testicular cancer. He has plans for a full-blown musical play with characters that include Conlan, a man struggling with a cancer diagnosis, his wife, Halle, his physician, Dr. Saxon and a villain, TC, whose initials stand for “testicular cancer.”

He eventually wrote 17 songs with titles like “Your Number’s Up” “How Could This Be” “We Will Face This Foe” and ending with the upbeat “Life Is Good.”

The songs express sentiments well known to cancer patients:

“Things have gone too well for you, too well, too well. Time to cast a spell on you, time to give you hell,” TC sings to Conlan.

“Everything was fine, everything was good. Now there’s only rubble where great buildings once stood. My life has changed, I’ve lost my footing, my bearing. The pages of my life neatly written are now tearing,” Conlan laments.

He recorded all the songs at home and produced a compact disc that is available through his website www.turningthirty.org.

Willner has performed some of the songs locally and was among a few musicians chosen to perform at the American Cancer Society’s Celebration on the Hill at the National Mall in Washington, DC.

Since his battle with cancer, Willner embraces the philosophy expressed by Conlan in the musical finale: “I got

“I got everything I could ‘cause I got life and life is good.”

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“It sounds like a cliché but my advice to other people, cancer patients or not would be to enjoy every moment because all you really have is right now. I really approach life a lot differently now. I try to focus on what I really enjoy and maximize that time,” he said.

Since his experiences, he and his wife make it a point to do something for people they know who are undergoing hardships.

“After being on the receiving end of so much support, I always tell people not to just ask if there is anything they can do. Doing something means so much more, whether it’s baking cookies, sending a care package to the hospital, or helping out their family.” he said. WR