

## Keven's Story

### *Keven Drews was diagnosed with multiple myeloma (MM) in 2003*

I remember the day I first began to fight back against cancer. More than a week after my diagnosis, in early April 2003, I was laying in a bed in Royal Columbian Hospital. Visitation hours were over. My parents and wife had left. The ward was quiet, and the room was dark. Days earlier, doctors had diagnosed me with multiple myeloma, a nasty blood cancer that had attacked my bones, wreaking havoc on my vertebrae. The disease usually attacks people in their 60s; I was just 30. So there I was, with earphone plugged into the TV, watching a Vietnam-era war movie. Then, out of nowhere a phrase popped into my head: "I ain't dead, yet." I repeated it, and for the first time in weeks, I cracked a grin. Who knows what lay ahead, I thought, but one thing was sure: I was still alive, watching a movie.

Throughout my treatment, at points when I was feeling the worst and sickest I've ever felt in my entire life, I'd repeat this phrase. I repeated it when I felt excruciating pain, feared for my own survival, faced my stem cell transplant, recovered, and, yes, relapsed.

In addition to my religious faith, this little phrase gave me a tiny sense of power after cancer had sent my life spinning out of control. "I ain't dead, yet" was a sentence, a weapon, a mantra I could hurl back at the face of cancer. However small a weapon it was in this great battle, it was still a weapon. And I used it.

My war against cancer officially began on March 31, 2003. Until that day, I was a journalist on the career path who was supporting a wife attending UBC. I was active, a former soldier, a surfer for nearly 17 years and a man who lived to run. But after months suffering through excruciating back pain – a pain diagnosed as a slipped disc, but a pain that felt as if somebody were twisting a dull screwdriver into my spine – I was admitted to Royal Columbian Hospital in New Westminster.

Within hours my doctor delivered the news. "You've got cancer." Immediately, I felt as if I was an actor in some movie in which I had no control over, a feeling that has followed me ever since.

My family – my wife, my parents and my brother – were all crushed.

"Terrified" is not a word that would do justice to how they or I felt. I'll admit when I wasn't drugged out on morphine, a drug that has controlled my ever-present pain ever since, I cried a little too.

After about two weeks I was discharged, and over the next three months as I waited for my stem cell transplant between April and June 2003, I relied on "I ain't dead, yet". I repeated it often during my transplant's workup, during radiation treatment and blood work. I repeated it many nights after my prayers.

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I repeated it whenever I was terrified, a feeling that overwhelmed me as soon as I researched my disease on the internet and in pamphlets and brochures. Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that family, friends, church, God, comedy, books, great nurses and doctors, and lots of luck didn't play a role in my emotional health and survival. They did and do, and you'll need to call on some or all of them to get through this battle. Yet, they were and are all external forces I've called upon. "I ain't dead, yet" was different. Like my faith, it was something internal I could call upon.

In early June 2003, I remember feeling terrified, yet a little relieved, as I walked onto VGH's Leukemia/Bone Marrow Transplant ward. Yes, I was finally being treated in a significant way, but this was it; this was the big life-and-death showdown. My first night on the ward, I remember sitting on a bed, talking to a doctor. "Well," she said, "you've certainly got a big battle on your hands." I didn't respond, but said silently, "I ain't dead, yet."

My wife soon joined my battle, posting on the walls more mantras: faith, hope, fight, fight, fight, and even kick ass. My parents and friends, even church leaders visited, lending me emotional and spiritual support. Every morning I awoke, however, I saw those mantras posted to the wall. I saw them while I was throwing up from chemo. I saw them as I waited for my counts to climb following my stem cell transplant. Those words joined my arsenal of weapons. With "I ain't dead, yet," they gave me a great psychological boost.

Somehow, I made it through the transplant, and in early July 2003 with a cane in one hand, I shuffled off the transplant ward.

Since my transplant, I've faced some tough times. It was stressful waiting for my 100-day checkup and my doctor's announcement that I was in remission. It sucked watching one friend, whom I'd met on the ward, die, and others stop attending the outpatient clinic as I continued to live and gain strength. I felt drained – as if a battery was sucking power from my body – during the onset of graft-versus-host disease in the Fall of 2003. Sometimes, I'd sleep for 16 hours a day. Yet, I continued to grow stronger and stronger until I relapsed in the Fall of 2005. Somehow,



some of my cells went haywire inside my skull's marrow and a tumour grew, taking out a toonie-sized chunk of bone. Once again, doctors hammered me with radiation and drugs, killing the tumour but leaving a huge hole in my head. My hematologist gave me the all-clear sign in December 2005. Looking back, "Hell" couldn't describe what I've faced in the last three years. Regardless of how sick or depressed I felt, however, time and again I'd just have to remember one thing to make myself feel better: "I ain't dead, yet."

My life has changed dramatically since March 2003. My career is no longer as important to me as it once was. Family, especially my wife, is now my priority. I have fewer friends now. Some, I believe, just couldn't watch me wither and possibly die. Faith is more important than ever. Don't forget the "God factor."

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Today, I live a simple life. I run a small online newspaper in Tofino, B.C. I walk on the beach, read books and magazines, and when the surf is up, I pull on my wetsuit, grab my board and catch a couple of rides. Oh, yeah, I coat myself in sunscreen. Most important of all, I now focus on the moment. Yes, there's a chance I'll relapse again down the road – knock on wood – and face more treatment and, perhaps, a not-so-happy outcome. But that's not the case right now. Right now the sun's still shining, the birds are still chirping, and I can still enjoy life. Best of all, I woke up this morning to enjoy it all again. I have to say, "I ain't dead, yet."

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