



Interview Transcript: Chris

At the time of the interview, Chris worked for Lakehead University as a systems administrator. He was married and a father. Chris passed away in January 2010.

Type of Cancer: Metastatic Melanoma (Stage 4)

Age at Diagnosis: 36

Year of Diagnosis: 2009

Treatment: Chemotherapy

Date of Interview: July 2009

My name is Chris Zeigler and I'm 36 years old. I live in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I work at Lakehead University, and this is my daughter Alexandra. I was diagnosed in December of last year with stage 4 metastatic melanoma.

Getting the News

Well, we always see on TV or different areas where people get news such as getting cancer and it's devastating. You really don't know how devastating it is until it happens to you. And I know initially it's difficult to get news like that. And then I'd get the news and we'd go in to talk about how it went. And then we'd get news again that was bad. We went through that a couple of times. It seemed like every time we'd be getting somewhere we'd get bad news and that was very, very hard. It was very hard to hear. It usually took us some time. I know the first day is the worst and you do nothing but think about it after that. Eventually it does get better. Eventually it does get easier to live with. Sometimes—it's kind of funny—what I try to do is I basically bury my head in the sand. You go through your day and almost pretend you don't even have cancer and that's one of the ways you try to get through it. I know one of the positives that I've seen—I really didn't know just how strong my wife was until I went through this, and even how strong I can be.

Letting People Know

Letting people know that I had cancer and the type and the stage was a difficult process. My initial reaction, other than my wife and I knowing, I found it very hard to tell family. I found it actually easier to tell friends than to tell family because I knew the family would be so upset. My parents specifically. So I kind of made a tentative schedule of telling people, I made it one by one. I had a small group of people, including my parents, that I wanted to know before anybody else knew and so I made sure that they knew. And went through that process...it still took us a while. It took us some time to go through the information ourselves and process the feelings and everything ourselves before we went on to tell anybody else. That was probably one of the harder parts of this.

The Treatment

Well, the initial treatment was a drug called interferon and that lasted a month. Physically that was very difficult with the different symptoms of nausea, headaches and fatigue. Nobody can really describe how difficult it can be. My family too; it was difficult for them to watch. And then to get the news that it had moved on was quite hard. When we started the chemotherapy I didn't really know what to expect. After going through basically a month of hell, I figured that the chemotherapy would be hard. I had a pleasant surprise, obviously, as you can see I still have my hair. I'd been able to eat. It's been much, much better; much, much more tolerable. So I've been pretty lucky, compared to others that are taking chemotherapy. This type of chemotherapy that I had for melanoma has allowed me to, for the most part, keep an appetite and as you see my hair, which has been very nice.

Expectations

People, when they think—when they hear that you have cancer, they expect something different than what I have been going through. They expect to see more physical changes and for me, if it hadn't have been for the initial treatment, the interferon and then the chemotherapy, with some of those side effects, then you really wouldn't even know that I had cancer. So right now I guess it's at a point where...I find that hard on me too, even being off work. Like I feel I should be at work. When you don't feel sick you feel like you should be doing something.... That's been quite a change, not working and doing things to keep busy. It was hard early on before Lisa had the baby. I was home by myself more and so that I found very difficult, to try and fill my days, and it was a matter of finding things to do. And even if it was going out for lunch with friends, just to try to break up the day and not be at home so much, because that got very hard—to be at home so often.

Where I Live

Being in Thunder Bay had its pluses and drawbacks. When I look at the smaller communities in northwestern Ontario, I guess Thunder Bay is basically the hub of northwestern Ontario. And we're extremely lucky to have the cancer clinic that we do have here. However, we're still isolated here in northwestern Ontario. Even for the surgery that I had we went down to Princess Margaret. And currently I'm awaiting a consultation with a doctor down there. So it does have its drawbacks, having to travel and stay away from home and away from family. It's difficult. As good as the centre that we do have, there are still areas with doctors down in Southern Ontario that we don't have up here.

What I Focus On

One of the biggest things for me is having my little girl. She's really taken (you can hear her right now actually), she's really taken a lot of our time and our energy and allowed both of us to focus on her and not on the cancer. Unfortunately it's there every day and probably both of us think about it every day. You know, because there are different things—the appointments and the treatments and so forth—that don't allow us to forget. But having her has basically been a godsend because it just allows us to focus on something much more positive, much happier, and it really gives me something to live for. I don't have a choice. I don't have a choice but to beat this and get better because I do have a beautiful little girl and a family that's going to help us do that.