

Imerman Angels gives cancer patients a reason to believe

It's been a tough year, 2008. One minute, I hear about the strides we've made against cancer, how the number of new cases has dropped finally. The next minute, I'm reminded of how many people I know who have been stricken with cancer, or succumbed to it, this year.

It started with my girlfriend's father, who just a month after being officially diagnosed with lung cancer last spring, was gone, taken from his friends and family way too early. He was 60.

The second was my grandpa, who survived more heart problems in his lifetime than any five people should encounter. His first heart attack was at 38. He later had triple and quadruple bypasses, and I forget how many angioplasties. And yet he lived to 85, eating ice cream and chocolate and biscuits and gravy the whole way. Cancer finally proved to be too much in July. I still pick up the phone to call him sometimes and get halfway through dialing before it hits me.

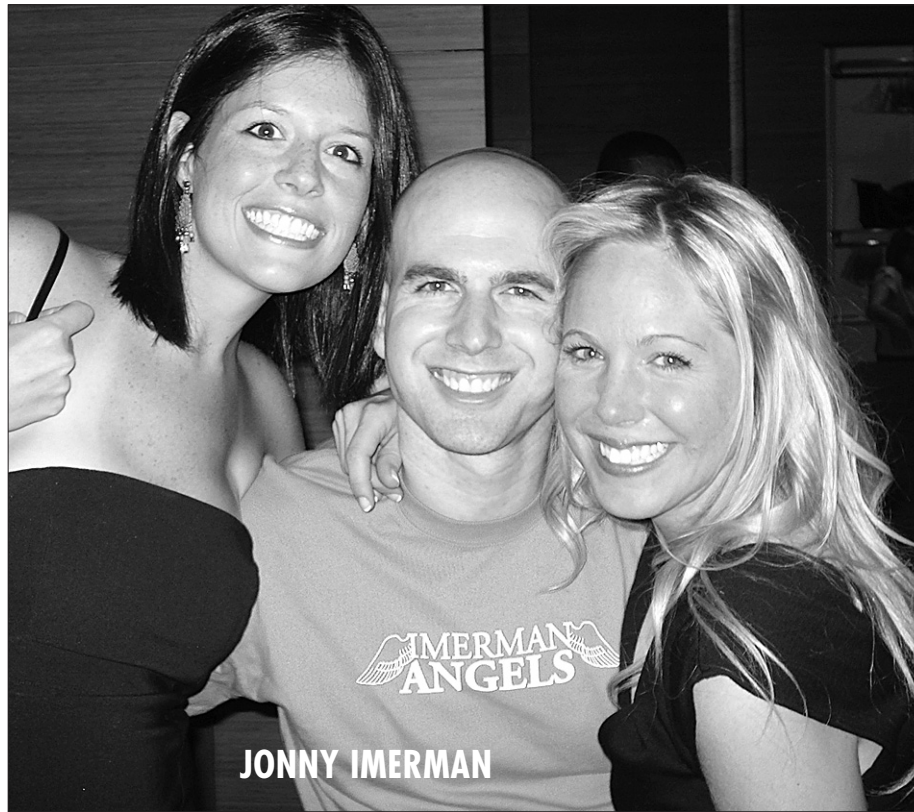
Several friends also have had relatives pass away this year after battles with the disease. Others have learned that difficult battles lie ahead. One is my friend Mike, who is more than halfway through a major chemotherapy treatment and responding well. With the support of a loving wife, adorable young son and close-knit family, he is staying positive during his ordeal, and things are looking up.

As I type this, I can't wait for tomorrow to be able to tell Mike what I learned today about Imerman Angels, a not-for-profit organization that provides one-on-one cancer support by connecting cancer fighters, survivors and caregivers. Imerman Angels, named after founder Jonny Imerman, who I met briefly a few months ago, partners a person fighting the disease with someone who has beaten the same type of cancer.

Those immersed in the battle, or the caregivers involved, can ask personal questions and get the support, encouragement and guidance they need from someone who is acutely aware of what they're going through. The service is free, and it's available for any stage or type of cancer victim, living anywhere in the world.

Once the initial contact is made, representatives from Imerman Angels, who all happen to be cancer survivors themselves, speak to the person who is battling cancer and collect the relevant information to make a helpful connection with a similar survivor. The company's database is 1,400 survivors strong, and in 2008 alone, it has made more than 750 connections. Imerman himself speaks at various functions around the country, and the rapidly growing company has regular functions to allow their "angels" and "fighters" or caregivers to meet, and to raise money.

The easy thing to do, when first diagnosed, is to isolate



JONNY IMERMAN

yourself and retreat from those who care about you. You tend to feel like you're the only one who has cancer. But Imerman Angels has created a niche for people to understand there is someone else just like them, someone who has not only dealt with what they're going through, but made it through to the other side.

"It's amazing to watch people go through our program because you almost always see an immediate response with them," says Laura Alexander, the company's director of events and public relations, as well as a three-year breast cancer survivor and mother of a nine-year-old daughter. "The whole reason we partner people is to reduce anxiety, not to increase it."

"Our goal is to make sure someone feels like they're not alone, and more importantly, to put them in touch with someone who has survived it, so you can hold on to that hope. Jonny always says that everyone deserves their own Lance Armstrong, because the right attitude is a lot of the battle."

Once linked, the fighter and survivor can ultimately determine the depth of their own relationship. Whether it means they speak over the phone about medication, treatment and concerns about how to explain things to a child, meet for coffee once a week or sit in the waiting room for moral support is up to them.

Alexander previously had a 14-year stint as a successful talent agent, but something changed after her recovery.

"I was lucky to have a career that I loved," she says. "I was in a very exciting business, and it was great. But after cancer, I couldn't plug back in. It didn't mean anything. All three of us in the office are survivors, so we try to pay it forward by working with these people and helping them make sense of why they have it to begin with. Jonny thinks, no question, he got cancer for this reason. This is his life's calling. This is what he is supposed to do, and I kind of feel the same way."

I mention to Laura that when I met Jonny, he seemed to give off this vibe, like he was all aglow, sincere, always smiling, enjoying life, living each day to its fullest. That attitude makes sense, considering Imerman was informed he had testicular cancer back in 2001, when he was just 26, only to learn that it had spread, and then a year later, discover he had tumors near his spine that required four hours of surgery and more intensive treatment. While thankful for the support he received from loved ones, Imerman couldn't help but feel guilty when he roamed the hospital hallways, chemotherapy IV tubes attached, and saw fellow patients who had no one. No positive support, no one to lean on.

Now, his company provides both.

"When I first met Jonny, he was a total ray of sunshine," Alexander says. "I volunteered with him for a long time before quitting my job to come to work for him full-time."

The job she was leaving was a dream job, but her path was set. It just felt right.

Talk about your leap of faith.

"I so believe in the Jonny aura," she adds.

And when you see what his company is doing to help those searching for answers, searching for hope, it's hard not to.

For more information on Imerman Angels, or to get connected, recommend someone or donate money, call (312) 274-5529 or log on to www.imermanangels.org

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