



Jon Imerman, founder of Imerman Angels, said survivors can give those with cancer mental support by telling them, "I've been there and I understand. I relate. I remember." —DOM NAJOLIA/SUN-TIMES

An angel for cancer patients

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With the news about the cancer challenges that Cardinal Francis George and Maggie Daley are facing, I started to think about Jon Imerman.

Have you ever been introduced to someone who makes an immediate impact that is so strong and positive? That's how I felt when I met Imerman. He just has this intensity about him. It's almost as if one can see this glow surrounding him.

In that first conversation, he gave me his card and mentioned he has quit his full-time job to devote all his time to his true passion, Imerman Angels. I remember thinking, yes, that's what he reminds me of: an angel. I've thought about him often since that brief introduction a few months back. With our collective minds centered around cancer, I decided to get together with him.

Imerman Angels, as his card indicates, provides one-on-one cancer support. It has become his 24/7 passion.

The idea came to him while he was fighting testicular cancer. "I was totally caught off guard," he said about his diagnosis of Stage III cancer at age 26. "It is the last thing you are thinking about."

Even though Imerman had confidence in his medical team and the

strong, loving support of his family and devoted friends, something was missing. If only he could talk to a 28-year-old survivor of testicular cancer, he thought.

"It was the one puzzle piece that was missing," Imerman said. "I just wanted to talk to one guy."

Think about it. Hearing one has cancer has to be so frightening. Yes, there are doctors with possible cures and people you love offering encouragement. But what a boost it would be to see in the flesh or hear the voice of someone who's been in your shoes and made it.

While hospitalized, Imerman would grab his IV pole and walk the halls. He noticed something. Not

Jon Imerman plays matchmaker for those fighting cancer and survivors who had the same type of cancer.

every cancer patient had a room like his filled with supportive loved ones. In fact, he'd pass room after room of individuals facing the fight of their lives, alone. He knew that wasn't right.

With those experiences in mind, he started Imerman Angels. He plays matchmaker, teaming up what he calls cancer fighters with "walking, living proof," survivors who had the same type of cancer.

He began a few years ago in his free time, and as mentioned, only started doing this full time four months ago. Word of mouth, the Web site, www.ImermanAngels.org, and

Imerman's constantly ringing cell phone bring pairs together. He tries to unite people who share the same age, gender (if it matters), cancer type and treatment plan. When I talked to him, he had just paired a young man with an extremely rare form of cancer with a survivor who had beaten that same unusual cancer. Location didn't matter, so now the phone lines between Washington, D.C., where one is located, and Los Angeles, are providing a lifeline.

When the survivor connects with the person facing cancer, as Imerman described it, it's as if he's saying, "I've blazed the trail. Let's go to the start. Let me take you down that same path. This time I am with you."

Because even if one does have supportive family and friends, sometimes it's just easier or more helpful to talk to a survivor. Sometimes it isn't easy sharing one's fears with a spouse or parent who probably is pretty darn fearful, too. Often, only a survivor has helpful hints about things such as mouth sores, skin problems, how the drugs in cycle two of chemo are different than those in cycle three.

He can't praise his volunteer survivors enough, and Imerman is pretty pumped with their results and the other activities the group has going. Monthly toy drives for children with cancer at Children's Memorial Hospital (the next one is Wednesday at Junior's, 724 W. Maxwell), a bikeathon on Sept. 17 and fund-raiser fashion show in October all are coming up.

Who would think that being surrounded by cancer would bring one person such joy? But Imerman is one serene young guy. One can tell he knows that giving to other cancer fighters is what he was meant to do.

"This gift is my favorite gift to give."