

# Tom Willner: 'Good humor goes a long way'

By JOEL MARTIN  
Herald Special Sections

If you ask Tom Willner about his experience with cancer, brace yourself. The joke he makes in return will make ladies blush and men wince.

Tom's diagnosis ten years ago was "nonseminoma testicular cancer of mixed type," which boils down to testicular cancer. That's kind of a two-edged sword. On one hand, it's nasty even as cancers go, with a high mortality rate and a strong chance of metastasizing. On the other hand, how can you not laugh about testicles? Especially when that's all you can do.

"How well you respond to treatment really has a lot to do with your attitude," says Tom. "Good humor goes a long way."

Being upbeat hasn't always come easily to Tom. Back in 1999, Tom was just about to turn thirty, with a loving wife, a good job, lots of supportive friends and a generally bright future. Then he noticed a small lump in one testicle. He took both lump and

suspicious a few days later to his doctor, who scheduled him for an orchiectomy, a surgery to remove the whole testicle, lump and all. Tests would then show if it had been cancerous or not.

That sounds backward, but it's the standard procedure

in a case like Tom's. It's always possible that a tumor isn't cancerous, but that chance is about five percent. A biopsy is a bad idea in this case, due to the risk of spreading the cancer merely by disturbing it. Testicular cancer is prone to head "north," as the testicles drain into the lymph nodes in the retroperitoneum, around the kidneys. Likewise, removing the tumor and leaving the testicle alone allows a high likelihood of leaving behind precancerous cells that will just cause a recurrence. No, the whole testicle would have to come off.

Tom lost it. "I screamed, I cried, and I read. I read everything I could find on the internet about testicular cancer. My father had died two years prior of prostate cancer, and I was in shock that I could be battling the same type of disease."

The operation itself is a fairly simple one. The surgeon makes an incision along the bikini line, then slips the offending gland up and out. Total time on the operating table is approximately 45 minutes. The part that drags



Courtesy photo  
Tom Willner at the 2008 Relay for Life, flanked by adoring fans Terry Moore and Donna Anderson.

on into forever is the days or weeks after the operation, waiting for the pathology report. Is it cancer, or isn't it? And if it is, what kind?

Tom's results took six excruciating days to come back. When they did,

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it confirmed all his middle-of-the-night fears. Not only was the testicle cancerous, but the cancer was a particularly aggressive one, and it had already spread. More surgery would be needed.

The next surgery wasn't nearly so easy as the orchiectomy. Tom would have to have a Retroperitoneal Lymph

Node Dissection (RPLND). In theory the operation was optional, but in practice, it really wasn't. Tom's chances of survival if he underwent the surgery were about 95 percent, compared to 70 percent if he didn't. That made the decision a fairly easy one.

The decision might be easy, but the procedure wasn't. "The RPLND - that's where they cut you open, move all your organs out, remove all the lymph nodes from your back and put it all back in again," says Tom. After the operation, he spent the first several days being fed through a nasal-gastric tube, which led through his nose and straight into his stomach. The way Tom describes it, it really is as unpleasant as it sounds. But the RPLND is such a traumatic experience to the body that it's necessary.

"You have to learn to eat and go to the bathroom all over again. After the shock, none of your digestive system works. You also have to learn to walk again, because the abdominal muscles have been sliced through."

Not surprisingly, the orchiectomy had a pretty profound psychological effect on Tom. "I went through five



Courtesy photo

In addition to the Relay for Life, Tom will be performing at Michael's on the Lake after the Relay. Last year, Tom had the unique honor of having a drink named for him at Michael's: The All Fruits Ripe.

stages," he says. "Pony tail, beard, blond, buzzed and bald.

"(Having an orchiectomy) makes you want to go out and do manly things. The beard was one aspect of that. I thought, 'Dammit, I'm going to be Grizzly Adams for a while!'"

One side effect that Tom's doctor had warned him about did come to pass - he would never be able to sire children naturally. Fortunately, he had taken his doctor's advice and made several deposits at a fertility clinic. At the same time this was discovered, Tom's wife Allyson suffered a miscarriage. Using in vitro techniques, the

Willners were able to conceive again and soon had a baby on the way. For the next six months, everything looked bright and cheerful.

Then came the bombshell. A recurrence had been found in Tom's lung. The news came as Tom and Allyson were planning an overseas vacation. With the knowledge of what might happen in the background, Tom says they concentrated on enjoying the vacation to the fullest.

The operation that awaited Tom

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Everyone has their own reasons for doing Relay, a relative with cancer, a special patient, friend, etc.

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when they returned home was a lung thoracotomy, also called a wedge resection.

“That’s where they take out a third of my lung, a lobe,” says Tom. “The second time the epidural worked, so I wasn’t in pain, but I woke up with thirty tubes and wires attached to me.”

As it turned out, the cancer in Tom’s lung was a metastasis of the testicular cancer. Tom’s oncologist gave him three weeks to recover, then started him on chemotherapy.

The time Tom spent on chemo can mildly be described as sheer hell. The reason is fairly obvious: chemo essentially consists of pumping poisons into the body to kill the cancerous cells. In the process, the poisons can make the rest of the body pretty darned miserable.

“I spent the first half of each round nauseous and miserable, losing a little bit of every sense - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching - in the

process. I was taking medicines to counteract the side effects of medicines to counteract the side effects of medicines.”

As miserable as it was, the chemo was the last treatment Tom would have to have. The whole ordeal had lasted just about a year. In that year, Tom’s perspective had undergone a huge shift.

In addition to his day job, Tom had always been very active in making music. He began playing piano when he was six, and taught himself the guitar in college. As an undergraduate he had played a regular gig for beer money, but real life took priority after he graduated. He still wrote, recorded and performed, but his real calling as a musician came after his cancer.

Like any musician, Tom’s music was influenced by his life experiences, and the cancer was a biggie. The experience gave his music a whole new dimension. He recorded an album about his experience, and followed it up with a musical play, called Turning

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Thirty, which centered around a man with testicular cancer.

Around this time, Tom also began playing at the Relay for Life. It was a natural fit; he knew what the survi-

vors and patients were going through, and could translate those feelings into notes and words.

“What got me noticed was a music video I did for the Relay called ‘Celebrate.’ They had a very specific need. They wanted voiceovers and an instrumental part. After I wrote it they

were so happy they wanted to film me. A lot of people have gotten to hear me through that. I did another video called “What will you do?”

Besides various Relay events in the Atlanta area, Tom also began to branch out to North Carolina and, yes, Washington state.

Last year Tom was a star attraction at the Grant/South Adams Relay for Life. It was his first trip to the north-west (except for a brief visit to Seattle), and he was surprised to see that there was a whole side of Washington that didn’t look like the set from “Frasier.” He was also pleasantly overwhelmed by the response to his performance so far away from home.

“One of the things that happened is that after I played in Washington, the traffic to my website from Washington rivaled the traffic from Atlanta,” he says.

Tom even received an honor few Washingtonians can boast: he had a beverage named for him at Michael’s On The Lake. It’s called “All Fruits Ripe,” and it’s inspired by a song of the same name Tom had performed

at the Relay. The song, in turn, comes from a Jamaican phrase meaning “everything’s fine.”

This year Tom will be performing at Michael’s after the Relay. He also has several CDs on sale through his website, [www.tomwillner.com](http://www.tomwillner.com), and he tries to put up a new song for free download every month from the same site.

But his greatest joy is still his family. Through the in vitro processes they used to have their first baby, Tom and his wife Allyson have three children: eight-year-old Klara, five-year-old Elliot and six-month-old Miles. Having the family has made Tom put everything else in perspective. It’s hard to take anything too seriously anymore.

“The experience gave me a new perspective on life,” he says. “You never know, so enjoy every moment. I don’t get upset about anything - nothing ever gets me too sad.

I look forward to the day when my kids ask me, ‘Where do babies come from?’ I’ll say, ‘Well, first you go see your embryologist...’

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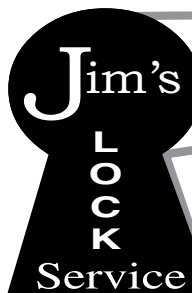


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