

views

Graphic Medicine

Navigating the waters as a cancer survivor for the last decade

BY CHRISTIAN “PATCH” PATCHELL



At work in my studio. Photo by Concetta Barbera @conzettamariabarbera.

Navigation served as my inspiration for this article. When I finished treatment for my cancer, it was suggested that I join a support group—something to help me with the “after” of cancer. I opted to go to a meeting entitled “Navigating the New Normal.” My first thought was, “That’s a pretty goofy name!” My second thought: “Navigating is pretty cool, though.” Like an explorer chronicling his latest expedition, I chose to document my journey through dates, times, and experiences. My “captain’s log” paints the picture of an artist and educator coping, learning, and growing as a survivor.

The Expedition

April 2007: I notice a bump on the left side of my tongue. It starts to get in the way of eating. I like to eat, so I get crabby a lot. During one of my crabbiest episodes, my girlfriend, Melissa, suggests that I see a doctor. We argue—we never argue. In order to win said argument, I make an appointment with a doctor.

May 2007: I am diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma of the lateral tongue, stage IV. The recommended treatment is lymph node removal and concurrent chemoradiation. The doctors keep telling me that I’m young and healthy, which is weird to hear. Melissa won the argument. I ask her if she’d like to “take a break” while I go away to Camp Cancer for nine months. She says no.

June 2007: Waiting for a PET (positron emission tomography) scan, I sketch. I begin treatments and make a pact with myself. For every day of treatment, I will draw for an hour. I won’t let cancer take that away. I draw the things I’ve drawn all my life—the stuff I drew when I was a kid. My sketchbook becomes filled with monsters and heroes. I worry that I will lose the ability to speak—that I will lose my voice.

August to October 2007: I finish treatment, but not without highs (my sketchbook, love and support, ice cream sandwiches) and lows (hospitalization, the last week of radiation, my white blood cell count). I begin

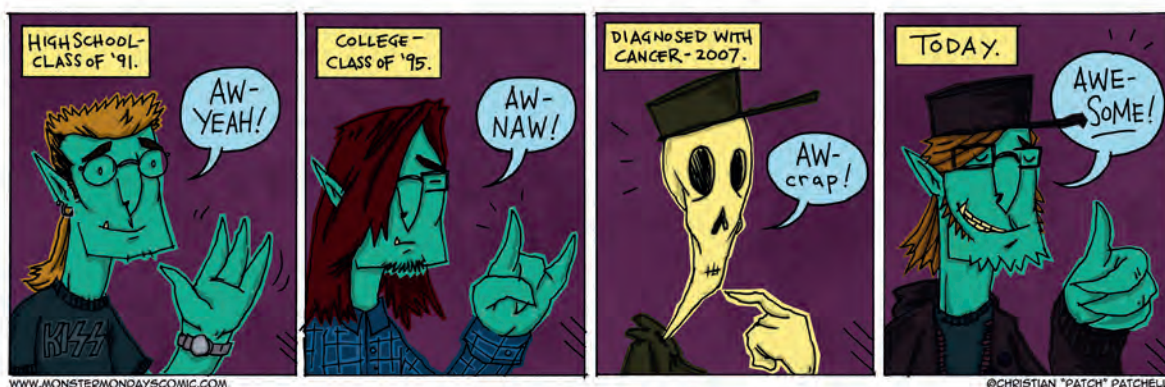
to take small steps toward returning to work and my “normal” life while I wait to see if there is any activity in my scans.

This is when I first meet with depression. My body and mind have changed, and I’m unsure of my future. Hanging out with my best friend Kyle, I break down. He takes his hand, puts it on my shaved head, and tells me to stay strong. We decide to go see *I Am Legend*, a movie in which—spoiler alert—the monsters are created as the result of a search for a cure to cancer. Kyle asks me if I’d like to leave the theater. I say no.

November 2007: No activity in my scans. I know what I’m thankful for this Thanksgiving. Melissa asks me if I want to take a break and re-experience life with her. I say yes.

January 2008: I turn 34, my happiest birthday ever. I also decide to return to teaching, my best decision ever. I apply for two grants to print the sketchbook I kept while undergoing treatments; I receive both. After showing the sketches to a former instructor, I decide to write about my

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Excerpt from my online comic strip “Monster Mondays.”

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experience. Flipping through my sketchbook is like looking at a scrapbook or photo album. I start what would become *I Put the Can in Cancer: A Journey Through Pictures*.

March 2008: I mention my book-in-progress to the class I'm teaching. One of my students asks, "Are you ready to do that?" I thought I was. As I am designing page 18 of my book—a page filled with scans of the notes I wrote while I had a trach in—I have to stop. I realize two things: that I'm not over dealing with this disease and that my students are smart.

Fall 2011: My book is finished and about to be printed. It took two years to write and design; treatment only took nine months. We decide to hold a book release party at a local gallery. I have a case of 60 books shipped to the gallery early. Nearly 200 people attend. I read from my book and get choked up when I look out at the sea of faces—family, friends, students, faculty, fellow survivors. That moment stays with me to this day.

December 2013: Now five years cancer-free, I decide to propose to Melissa. I drive down to North Carolina on Christmas Day to do it. The entire way down I rehearse what I am going to say, like a kid rehearsing lines for the school play. I surprise her and say my lines (almost) perfectly. She says yes.

October 2015: Melissa and I wed. The room is filled with family and friends. They all know our story. It's the greatest day of my life.

For the last decade, I have shared my book and my experiences in the classroom, at charity events, and during lectures and talks. When I share it with artists and creatives, I talk about communicating a personal experience through art. When discussing my experience with people in the dental and medical profession, I share the healing power of art and creativity. And when sharing my experience with patients, caregivers, and survivors, it's about holding on to and claiming something as your own—something that disease cannot take away.

The Here and Now

Spring 2018: I begin discussing a course to be taught at Jefferson University through the Continuing Education Program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The idea is to teach observation through the arts. It is my hope to give medical students a place to feel creative and to make mistakes. I tell Melissa I fear that the students will not




(Above) My wife and I. (Top right) The front page of my "Graphic Medicine" sketchbook from the course at Jefferson University. (Center right) Portrait created by student, Bruce Reaves, in the Graphic Medicine course at Jefferson University. (Below right) Comic strip created by student, Laura Ayd, in the Graphic Medicine course at Jefferson University.

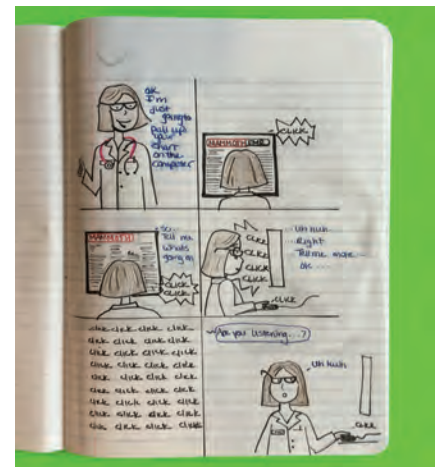
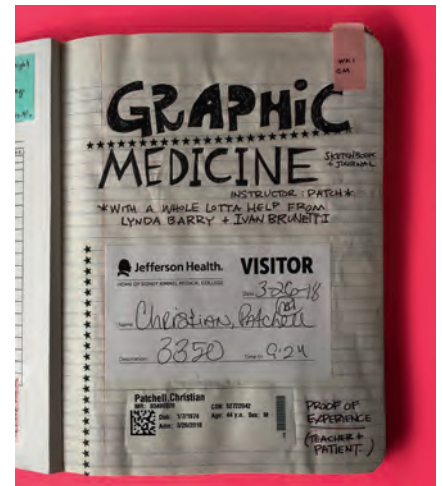
see me as an equal. She reminds me that I know best what I am teaching.

Summer 2018: I begin teaching Graphic Medicine. We discuss personal stories and how to share them through drawing and writing. I am impressed with the students' writing and their interest in being creative; they come to each class invested, make art, and tell stories. I am caught off-guard by the fact that they tell personal narratives, tales about what inspired them to enter their fields—the same as me. My misconceptions of why people study medicine are erased by my first class.

At the mid-semester point, I share my story. At first, they ask what they are trained to ask, questions about profiles and medical history. Eventually they turn to questions about my experience, questions about my artwork. I think the class is working.

October 2018: At the end of one of my classes, I tell my students about this article. I ask them what they would want to know about someone like me who is 10 years cancer-free. One of my students mentions that I should tell them how I won't draw cartoon characters smoking anymore.

Today: You're reading my story; I never lost my voice. I think I finally found out how to navigate the new normal. As an artist, I don't think I'll ever really warm up to the word *normal*, but as a cancer survivor, I really like that word *new*. *New* is filled with possibility and potential. *New* is where I am today. 



Christian "Patch" Patchell is an artist, educator, and cancer survivor. He is also the author of *I Put the Can in Cancer: A Journey Through Pictures*. You can see more of his art and writing at artbypatch.com.