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#### Three Sheets Northwest

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# Cancer survivor inspires boaters to make a difference

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By Deborah Bach on June 8th, 2010

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Five years ago, Paul Sweeny was a regular 23-year-old, recently graduated from college and ready to embark on the rest of his life.

Life Afloat

Then on New Year's Day of 2006, the Seattle man woke up and noticed a lump on his neck. It wasn't sore, so Sweeny thought little of it. He was planning to leave for a three-month Spanish immersion program in Latin America the following month and his thoughts were occupied by upcoming adventures.

But on the advice of his dentist, Sweeny went to the doctor to have the lump checked out. At a follow-up appointment, he heard the word that sent him reeling and in an instant, changed his life forever. Cancer. He had cancer — specifically, Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system.



On the Rocks

**Guest Dock** 

Paul Sweeny says his cancer has been both a challenge and a blessing.

"It was very shocking," said Sweeny, who will be speaking at the Leukemia Cup Regatta fundraising event in Seattle on Saturday night. "It was the last thing I was expecting to hear. I had no symptoms. I felt fine."

What followed were five grueling years of treatments and hospital stays, jubilation and dashed hopes, tiny improvements and debilitating days of weakness and nausea.

#### "It was really tough"

After his diagnosis, Sweeny underwent about four months of chemotherapy and was soon in remission. He was overjoyed, anxious to get on with his life and put the cancer behind him. But a check-up six months later showed it had returned. As Sweeny's friends began grad school, had fun on weekends and pursued careers, his life was thrown into limbo.

Sweeny underwent an autologous stem cell transplant, which involved removing his stem cells — baby blood cells — and preserving them while he was zapped with a megadose of radiation and chemotherapy, then putting the cells back. The cells then migrate to the bone marrow and start producing healthy new blood cells.

The procedure made Sweeny so sick he had to be fed intravenously. He lay in a hospital bed for about two months. For an active person who liked to play basketball and ride his bike, it was the most difficult thing he'd ever been through.

But again, there was good news. Sweeny went into remission for about nine months. Then the cancer returned. He was devastated.

"It's not easy to know that you've made a really big commitment to fight cancer and then it comes back," he said. "It really does require everything you and your family have to get ready, because the side effects are so intense and the hospital time is so intense."

"Having gone through how difficult treatment is and how much of a disruption it is to your life when you're trying to look for a career or go to grad school ... it was really tough on me and my family."

Sweeny needed another stem cell transplant. But this time, he was to receive another person's cells, a procedure known as an allogeneic transplant. It turned out that Sweeny's mother, Sarah, who he's very close with, was a perfect match.



Last December, Sarah Sweeny checked into the University of Washington Hospital and had stem cells removed from an area around her hip. The cells were taken to the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance a few miles away and transplanted into her youngest child. The donor typically stays in the hospital overnight after the procedure, but Sarah refused and went to see her son.

"My mom was both my donor and my caregiver," Sweeny said. "It meant a lot to both of us that it worked out that way."

A check-up in May showed Sweeny was again in remission. This time, doctors told him the outlook was as good as it could possibly be. He's now been in remission for almost six months, a three-time cancer survivor at the ripe old age of 28.

#### Motivated to make a difference

Now, Sweeny is focused on looking forward. He's doing an internship at Athlete Foundations, a Seattle organization that runs charitable outlets for professional athletes, and plans to finish graduate school this fall.

More immediately, he'll be speaking this Saturday night, June 12, at a party and auction after the Leukemia Cup Regatta, an annual sailboat race on Elliott Bay, and AquaQuest, a scavenger hunt for powerboaters on Lake Union. The three events support The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, which funds cancer research and provides services for patients and their families.

Sweeny has benefited from those services, which include matching cancer patients with mentors who have gone through treatment. Sweeny was matched with a young man named Matt who lived in Virginia and also had Hodgkin's lymphoma. The two talked often by phone, Matt lending his support and understanding in a way only someone who has experienced cancer can. His death in 2008 was a blow to Sweeny.

"It was really hard for me to see a friend lose his life to the same cancer I had," Sweeny said. "It made me angry, angrier that I already am that people have to go through stuff like we did, and more motivated to make a difference."

Sweeny now serves as a mentor to other cancer patients, and his family has participated in the powerboating event held in conjunction with the Leukemia Cup Regatta. His own experience, he says, made him understand the critical importance of cancer research.

"If this happened to me maybe 10 or 20 years ago, I wouldn't have had a chance," Sweeny said. "The research is extending people's lives and making treatments much more tolerable."

Despite the difficulties he's gone through, Sweeny sees his cancer as a sort of blessing. It's made him more compassionate, he says, and motivated him to get involved.

"It's given me a platform and a story to inspire people to help make a difference in the fight against cancer through funding research that I'm confident will lead to a cure," he said.

"And it's made me feel like I can overcome anything."

For additional information about Leukemia Cup Regatta and AquaQuest or to purchase tickets for the after-party and auction at the Seattle Marriott Waterfront Hotel, click here.

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## One Comment on "Cancer survivor inspires boaters to make a difference"



Carolyn

Commented on June 10, 2010 at 12:50 pm | Reply

Deb,

That is a very touching story. I really wish that young man the very best of luck when he goes for his next check up. He certainly has maintained a strong spirit throughout his ordeal. How remarkable that his mom could help him that way.

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