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CANADA

Cancer survivor and Hip fan shares his love and hope with Gord Downie

Yaron Butterfield wanted to share his story of cancer survival with Gord Downie, to whom he wrote a shorter message on his website, but wanted to write a longer letter.

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B.C. resident Yaron Butterfield, who was diagnosed with a glioblastoma brain tumour almost 13 years ago, is a rare long-term survivor and, coincidentally, a cancer researcher.

Jeff Vinnick for the Toronto Star

By Yaron Sidney Butterfield Special to the Star

Yaron Butterfield is one of eight people who shared his story of glioblastoma in interviews with the Star. Butterfield is a long-term survivor and meets with glioblastoma patients every month, with the aim of giving them hope they too can stave off the cancer longer than predicted. Butterfield wanted to share that with Gord Downie, to whom he wrote a shorter message on his website, but wanted to write a longer letter. “I don’t know what he’s been told . . . but he seems like a very positive guy. I’m letting him know, Hey, you can survive a long time — look at me,” says Butterfield, who’s a Tragically Hip fan.

The brain cancer Gord Downie has, they say is terminal. But life is terminal. No one knows how long we have. There are the statistics and there is reality. That’s what was in my mind when I entered Rogers Arena, in Vancouver. I had on my blue

Tragically Hip shirt, and I was so excited to get to my seat. I didn't even stop to get a beer or nachos.

The anticipation was building as I fumbled my way in the dark to find my place amongst the thousands of fans, every one of whom was standing and cheering. As the concert went on, there were moments where Gord looked straight at me. Like we were connected. I know it's me just believing that. But here's the thing, a doctor told me I had the same brain cancer Gord has. Over the years, I have spent time getting to know people who had also been diagnosed with that cancer and it is hard seeing some of them not make it.

The prognosis is not good.

Glioblastoma Multiforme (GBM) is a type of brain cancer where 90 per cent die by five years after diagnosis. Gord's cancer, from what I understand, is in the same part of the brain as mine was. He is receiving the same treatment I received. Same chemo, same radiation. In fact, radiation today is even more accurate in targeting the tumour than when I had it.

But there it is, that's why I felt connected at the concert. Like we were old buddies. If we met, I would tell Gord that there is no reason he cannot be a long-term survivor. I would also say that during treatment and after, always stay strong, positive and hopeful. Because I'm not dead and I was diagnosed almost 13 years ago.

Back then, though, my head was half bald and I always made sure to wear my version of the Fifty-Mission Cap. After throwing up my chemo pills in my fourth week of treatment, I was taken off chemotherapy as it was causing my white blood cells to drop to a near fatal level. As I sat getting transfusions I had no idea what was next, if treatment was having any effect at all in shrinking the tumour, or how long I was going to live.

Music was important to me in those early days of treatment. I often played the Hip. Courage was something I needed and what I listened to the most. Small confession, when I laid down on the MRI bed, I'd listen to Madonna (sorry, Gord). Of course, treatment, diet and exercise, positive thoughts and prayer, and most importantly, family and friends helped to heal me, too. But music healed me in a different way. It touched my brain and soul, inviting it to dance in ways it never had. Those voices include Downie's. His music helped save me. I'd like to return the favour.

In addition to music, Gord, here are some of the things that helped heal me.

Exercise. I ran my first marathon (and probably my last!) just over a year since diagnosis. I also continued to play hockey and I started cycling. Exercise is very important as it activates the brain. I'm not worried about you though, seeing you bouncing around, jumping and spinning on stage full of energy.

Diet. Early on, I leaned towards a more vegetarian diet, but couldn't go all the way as no one can say no to my mom's tasty Mediterranean spread. I had a lot of green tea and started making daily smoothies of kale, spinach, turmeric, chia seeds, flax and ginger. Apparently, you enjoy your mom's orzo with Italian sausage. I hope you're eating your green, too.

Love. It was clear at the concert that people love you, and I was one of them, sitting in Section 108. Continue to make sure you are with the people you really know and love. Continue to create purpose in your life. For me, it's through my art, my writing

and cancer research. In your way, you are clearly doing this through your art of poetry and song.
Be giving. Give to others, and you will ultimately receive good health. I cannot stress enough how important this is. With each song, with each concert, you are creating this reality.

Even if the cancer recurs, with survival statistics that are even worse, there is still reason for hope. I did have a recurrence. In fact, a year and a half after my initial diagnosis and treatment, the MRI showed that the tumour had actually doubled in size. As a cancer researcher (I know, if it isn't irony, it's something), I knew that the odds were against me. My hope was strong and I didn't feel that I was ready to leave. I held on to the belief that chemo would work again. And sure enough, it did.

The concert was near the end. The Hip had all just left the stage. Except Gord. He remained, and took his time walking slowly around the stage, looking at all his fans. It seemed as if he made sure he connected with everyone in the arena. I imagined that he winked at me. My level of appreciation and wonder in what Gord was doing on stage, was starting to hit me. I was reminded that despite set backs, it's up to us to decide that life can continue with vigour and passion. With each song, Gord had driven this point home. The crowd waved the light from their cellphones and the roaring cheers got louder and louder. Everyone was giving their love and hope — Fully. Completely.

Yaron Butterfield *is a cancer researcher and long-term survivor of a glioblastoma multiforme brain cancer. He is active in the community helping other brain cancer patients and is writing a book about his experience.*

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