

John wrote the following two essays to nominate his future wife, Cynthia, for a caregiver award, which was won in 2008. It reveals a lot about how he dealt with his diagnosis, treatments, and life in general.

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### 2007 JMU Relay for Life's Caregiver of the Year Nomination

It's hard telling not knowing why a childhood cancer hit me at age twenty. All I know is that it did and I didn't ask for it. No one does, but when something happens like this at my age you really learn who your friends are. It's not that the people who aren't there for you don't care but they just may not know what to do. Well, I was lucky enough to have a friend who knew what to do. Cynthia was there at my side keeping everything together. Every second she had, she was there helping me stay physically and mentally strong. When Cynthia would walk through the hospital door to visit me, all the pain and sickness I felt would immediately disappear, and nothing seemed to be as bad as it was when she was around me. She was the "magic pill," being able to make me feel better no matter how horrible I felt at the time. When the magic pill was near, I had the strength to go from week to week and battle through my treatments without getting too sick to the point where I would have to postpone a treatment.

Now when this all started in October of 2005, Cynthia was a sophomore at JMU studying chemistry and math as well as being one of the stars of the JMU Ski Racing Team. She didn't have time to drive from Harrisonburg to northern Virginia and back every weekend, but she did it any way. Cynthia found a way to be by my side each and every weekend and when ski season rolled around she was able to give me something more than just her presence. She was able to share a part of life I love and live for, skiing and ski racing. When I was strong enough to get out of the house and when I wasn't in the hospital, I would travel to my family ski resort of Bryce Mountain to watch Cynthia train and race for JMU. It made me happy just to get out and walk on the snow, but when I was able to spend time with close family and friends at the mountain while watching Cynthia have a blast arcing up the slopes of Bryce, it's hard to describe the joy I felt. When I would travel to Bryce and Harrisonburg with Cynthia, I was able to see friends and family that I wouldn't normally see sitting at home away from normal society. With Cynthia by my side, nine terrible months of intense treatments was something I knew I could do.

Today, I am cancer free and skiing every chance I get while living and working in Park City, Utah. I have a prosthetic humerus that I have been learning to live with. I am getting stronger each and everyday. Cynthia is now a junior at JMU, and I can't wait to see her soon.

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Every well-rounded individual at JMU and all over the world has been told that that life is short. Most young people I've meet in my short life have no way to relate this simple fact. We all know it will end some day but when you are young, you seem to be able to hide from reality using money, social life, and partying as a mask. No matter how much you do or have, life goes on.

It has been four years since I graduated high school. Now, most of the people I went to school with are about to graduate from their respective colleges, walking away with the lessons learned and the influences of the people around them. "Congratulations" is what I say, "a lot of hard work and learning goes a long way." They all have done something I have been unable to do in these four years that seems to be blinks of an eye.

The past four years of my life have not been structured in a college or university setting. I spent my first year out of high school in the state of Utah where I tried to further my career of ski racing, but life can't be scripted. I spent that ski season injured and out of races. Instead of racing, I met someone who needed my help. I teamed up with a guy who just graduated from the University of New Hampshire business school and he had an idea to do something new in the stale ski industry. That year, we started Ski Butlers, a ski rental delivery service, and now (almost 4 years later) it is the hot new thing and business is booming. That summer, I went to school at the University of Utah and had a blast. The environment there in Salt Lake City is amazing. I was healed by the summertime so I was able to enjoy the summer mountain biking in Park City and I also was able to ski until July 4<sup>th</sup> at Snowbird Mountain. I was falling in love with the State. After school ended in the late summer, I went home to Virginia for a short visit and took with me a shoulder pain that had been bothering me for a few months. About two weeks after going home and seeing my family doctor, I was in the hospital receiving high doses of chemotherapy. That shoulder pain was cancer cells growing in my shoulder joint, Osteosarcoma.

Life changed from having fun to surviving to have fun in the future. When you are hit with something like this, it really kicks your legs out from under you. You go from being the healthiest and strongest kid around, to being in a hospital bed for five days a week and having a pediatric oncologist telling you this is what you have to do with little to no explanation of why.

At this point in my life, I learned that being successful can be measured by the real friends who surround you. After plunging face-first into the world of fighting cancer, you realize how very few real friends you have. I am very lucky to have a strong and close family to constantly give their love and support. But after the initial shock of being diagnosed, your friends seem to fade away; college life starts again, and finding time to visit your friend in the hospital or at home takes a back seat to the whirlwind of new and exciting experiences to be had behind the mask of a new year at college. I can truly say that there is one person who never let the reality of what I was doing slip her mind. My long time friend and girlfriend Cynthia Din had always been a supporting factor in all my life decisions before being diagnosed, but taking on the challenge of being there for someone who was going through something so out of the norm of day-to-day JMU life is something that has forever changed me. She didn't have to do it, it's easy to drop something after it becomes too much. You see it all the time in day-to-day life, your course load is too heavy so drop a class, work is too hectic drop a project and do what you can. But no, it was never a question, even with a full course load, chemistry fraternity, ski racing, and friends and family, Cynthia would always find a way to make the two and a half hour trip from Harrisonburg to Northern Virginia where I was receiving treatments and living. Every chance she had, she was by my side. Cynthia was commonly called the "magic pill" around the hospital, simply because the second she walked through the door I would instantly smile and everything seemed to be okay. No matter how terrible I was feeling or how tired of fighting I was, having Cynthia there seemed to make all the pain go away.

So that's what we did that winter one week at a time: in the hospital for five days, out for two days, and back in on Monday. Nine months of it. The surgery was a big hurdle, losing the

use of my left arm was a big deal for an athlete but the surgeon was able to salvage a deltoid muscle which allowed me to lift my arm to ninety degrees. That was pretty cool. When school was out in May, Cynthia was there to help me finish the last two months of chemo. Nine months went by without me getting too sick to miss a treatment. I did it in the least amount of time possible. When it's all over, it seems like nothing. You are declared cancer free, just another one of life's hurdles. Cynthia helped me keep a positive attitude on the whole thing, always reminding me it's worth fighting for.

I spent that summer getting stronger and constantly thinking about getting back on snow. Cynthia was always there. When it came time for Cynthia to go back to school in the fall, I headed west back to Utah to live, work, and most of all, ski. I skied a lot that year; the snow was not the best, but like they say, "a bad day on snow is better than a good day at work." I saw doctors in Salt Lake City and every thing seemed to be good.

In the spring, I returned home to see my surgeon and he immediately noticed something was not right. A new tumor was growing on the deltoid muscle that he was able to salvage in the last surgery. The options were limited. Surgery was a must, but I had already received a lifetime amount of the chemo drugs that were proven to work on the cancer and radiation would leave my new arm almost useless. This past summer, I strengthened my new arm after a second surgery. It is a lot easier to bounce back from a major surgery without the affects of chemo. It was easy; I seemed as strong as ever. Cynthia never stepped away; we grew strong together waterskiing and helping turn dreams into reality. Even after new facts of having an aggressive cancer come back a second time, life goes on.

Now, I am back in Utah having an amazing year. We have had more snow this year than we had in 2004 (when Snowbird stayed open until July 4<sup>th</sup>) and I am skiing my tail off. Cynthia graduates from James Madison University this May and I will be there to see her. She has been accepted to the University of Utah's Pharmacy School and will attend the U of U in the fall, I only hope to be out there with her.

Cynthia is not like any other caregiver at JMU. She has been there to give anything and everything, just to make me feel better. She has learned first hand how precious life is. It's not something we talk about; it's just how we live our lives.