

There was always a piano in my house growing up in Western Massachusetts, but I never started playing regularly until I was a teenager. As soon as my friends and I formed our first band in eighth grade, playing music became such an important part of my life. For years, we'd teach ourselves to play our instruments, write songs, rehearse, and play shows. Throughout high school and college, the amount of time I had to devote to music varied, but I never lost the desire to continue writing songs.

It wasn't until hours after learning that I had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease in 1999 that I felt any sense of upheaval. Immediately after my doctor's appointment, I went back to the office and told my boss I'd be missing a lot of work. When I got home that night and was completely alone, everything seemed different to me. I felt very disconnected from my own body, as if it didn't belong to me. I started worrying about how I was going to be able to pay my bills and rent. I tried to sort through my statements, but I wasn't able to focus. It just didn't seem important. Everything I tried to do seemed meaningless.

I had treatments every other Friday for six months. I'd have a lot of ups and downs. My energy level and appetite would come back only to be knocked down again every other Friday. During the days in between treatments when I would feel better--physically and emotionally--I wrote lyrics to a few songs on a demo that my friend Adam had given me. He wanted me to sing and play piano on them. He was working in a recording studio at the time and would borrow the ADAT 8-track machine, a bunch of mics, and a mixer. He'd haul it over to my tiny apartment in Easthampton, Massachusetts, so we could record my vocals. We recorded in the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom closet. My cousin Steve joined us, adding some guitar and vocals as well.

Initially, I wasn't able to play piano. One of the many early side effects of the chemo was that my fingertips and toes were numb. When I regained a bit of feeling in my hands, I started playing the piano again. Even though it was difficult to keep my energy level up, we wound up playing a few shows at the Fire & Water Cafe in Northampton, Massachusetts. We named our band Smokejumpers. Making music gave me something positive to focus on and helped me get through my treatments. The lyrics to the songs I wrote reflected my experience dealing with cancer, and it was cathartic to play them in front of a crowd.

After my treatments ended, Smokejumpers continued to perform and write new songs. By then, we had finished the album, and I realized just how much it meant to me. As I resumed normal life again, I was willing to push myself to experience new things. I left my job and started an online promotional products business with my friend, which soon became profitable. I began a new relationship. And of course, I kept making music.

Life got in the way of making music once again in 2004 when my long-term girlfriend started having very serious health problems. I spent a lot of time as a visitor at Brigham & Women's Hospital where she underwent multiple surgeries and needed a lot of care. It was difficult to be by her side, because it reminded me of my own illness. To make matters worse, just as she started to become healthy again, I received some bad news after a routine CT scan. My local oncologist found a tumor and recommended a visit to Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. It's practically across the street from Brigham & Women's Hospital.

After multiple tests and three rather painful biopsy surgeries, a recurrence of my Hodgkin's was confirmed. Dana Farber recommended high-dose chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant. I'd be having this done at Brigham & Women's Hospital. It was devastating to realize that I'd be undergoing treatment at the same hospital where my girlfriend spent so much time as a patient. In preparation for the high-dose regimen and actual transplant, I needed a number of less severe chemo treatments. Luckily, I was able to do these close to home, but I hit quite a few bumps in the road. I got a blood infection in the catheter in my chest and needed hospitalization. I reacted poorly to the antibiotics that were prescribed. I had hydration issues. The chemo didn't go as smoothly as I had hoped and I felt very ill and worn out. It was turning out to be a much worse experience than my first experience with cancer. And I hadn't even gotten to Boston yet.

When I finally went through every test, treatment, and preparation before the month-long stay at Brigham & Women's Hospital, I was exhausted. In addition to feeling physically tired, it was a particularly emotionally trying time for my girlfriend and me. Because of her own health problems and the struggles she endured, she would have panic attacks and wasn't able to visit me in the hospital. I soldiered on as best I could, isolated on the fourth floor of Brigham & Women's for almost the entire month of December in 2005. The degree of decay my body experienced while I was going through the high-dose chemo and stem cell transplant surprised me. There were many times when I couldn't imagine how I would come out of it and lead a normal life again, let alone play piano and sing.

When my hospital stay was over, it felt like it had been a dream. Recovery was slow, and I was tired and weak for many months. Additionally, I had to remain isolated in my apartment and had to be mindful of germs and bacteria. I felt like everyone around me had assumed that the worst part was over and resumed their lives again, not realizing how difficult it still was for me. All of this led to a deep depression. My relationship with my girlfriend deteriorated and eventually ended. I sold a portion of the business to my partner and kept a part of it to run on my own. Because I was self-employed and the business wasn't doing well, it was difficult to keep up with my bills. I had a CT scan before I realized that my health insurance had been canceled. I had trouble paying for my utilities and rent. I wound up charging everything from groceries to utility bills on my credit card. And because I was proud--and eager to move on from my illness--I never let anyone know that I was having such financial troubles. I felt as though I'd be letting them down somehow if I did.

It took a number of years to get back on my feet again. I started realizing that, much like the first time I had cancer, pushing myself to play music again was an important part of my long-term recovery. I attended the open mic at PACE Theater in Easthampton, where years earlier I had performed with Smokejumpers. It was the premier live music venue in town. Andrea Coller, a person who also had Hodgkin's and had been through a lot of what I had been through, was the host. Over the years, she and I had sort of an unspoken camaraderie about our mutual health issues and, of course, about music. She had also performed at Fire & Water open mic nights way back when. When I took the stage and played my two songs, I knew I was finally taking the necessary steps to move forward with my life.

Slowly, I came out of my depression. I wrote a lot of songs, and began playing shows regularly again. To meet more musicians, I organized a singer-songwriter series at a local café and held a number of house concerts. Musically, I was back on track. Career-wise, after a bit of a search, I was able to get a good job at MassLive.com. I started dating again, this time with a new co-worker named Kristen. She had been an active listener of local music for many years and covered the scene for MassLive.com. She knew a lot of the same people I did, but somehow we'd never met until I started working there. We hit it off almost instantly and our relationship developed.

In June of 2008, we were married. Since she met me after I recovered from my illness, it is certainly hard for her to understand fully what I've been through health-wise. She only sees the repercussions. I tend to withdraw whenever it's time for my routine scans. Occasionally, I feel disconnected and abnormal. Even though it's been a few years, I still have my share of bad days among the good days and still fear a recurrence, especially now that I have a marriage to think about.

My primary goal the past year or so has been to get out of financial debt. Because of this, music has taken a back seat to saving money and working hard. But there's always a part of me that knows how important music is, and how I crave the experience of writing songs, making a record, and performing live. When Andrea Coller passed away this past April, it was an enormous wake-up call to me. I realize I need to focus more energy on my music again, and need to find a way to make a record. I've been in contact with recording studios and musicians, but it's financially out-of-reach for me while I focus on paying off my debt. I'm hoping that a SAMFund grant would be able to assist me with accomplishing this life-goal - sooner, rather than later.