

KCC coach Jacobson fighting brain cancer

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ben Jacobson wants to enjoy the normal pleasures in life, like seeing his young children graduate from school and start families of their own some day. Grandchildren would be wonderful.

His professional dream is to become the head coach of an NCAA Division I men's basketball team, running his own shop after helping Kirkwood continue its winning ways as an assistant coach.

But Jacobson, 34, is facing the biggest battle of his life after being diagnosed with Level 2 brain cancer last month following a frightening car accident that could have ended his life right then.

Jacobson is determined to win this fight against a dreadful disease and the inoperable 2 1/2-inch tumor that's lodged in the frontal lobe of his brain. Doctors cannot remove the tumor because of its delicate location without serious risk of leaving him handicapped, but radiation, chemotherapy and special drugs could help reduce the tumor.

A delicate operation could leave him blind or deaf. "So that's kind of out of the question," he said.

The battle has just begun, however.

"I've always been a fighter and I'm willing to fight this tumor. And I'm going to beat this thing," said Jacobson. "There's no doubt in my mind that I'm going to.

"This cancer will get my best fight, no matter what."

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Jacobson was driving home to Solon on Thursday, Oct. 19 after a normal day of teaching classes at Kirkwood Community College, helping with basketball practice and supervising study table. He was a few miles east of Ely when he apparently suffered a seizure and hit another car, causing his vehicle to flip numerous times and land in a ditch pointing the other way.

"My car flipped about 12 times to the other side of the road," he said. "I actually awoke while the car was turning at a fast pace and I was wondering if I was going to live or die.

"I remember thinking in my head, 'This is it.' I really thought that was the time it was going to be all over.

"When the car came to a stop, I looked around the vehicle and couldn't believe I was still here."

Jacobson was able to get himself out of his car and saw other people at the scene. "My first inclination was asking them, 'Am I still alive?'"

Jacobson suffered a number of deep bruises and contusions to his ribs and back, but there were no broken bones. He was taken to the University of Iowa Hospital & Clinics for a thorough examination, including a CAT Scan to see if he had a concussion.

There was no concussion, but the X-rays revealed a tumor in his brain. The next day, following a biopsy, he was told it was cancer. Until then, he had no idea.

"I can't even explain the feeling that I had at that moment," he said.

In an odd way, the car accident may have helped save his life by revealing the cancer now instead of later.

The preliminary report from his oncologist at the hospital was that it was a Level 3 or Level 4 cancer. Jacobson's wife, Natalie, googled for additional information and quickly learned that the life expectancy for Level 3 or Level 4 patients was eight to 13 months.

"She was obviously very shaken by that," he said.

The prognosis has since been lowered to Level 2, which is still very serious but better than Level 3 or 4. Treatments are scheduled to begin after Thanksgiving, and Jacobson has been encouraged by his local medical team to seek a second opinion from additional experts at Wake Forest and Duke, where he has friends and connections.

Jacobson has learned that 40 percent of the people who have Level 2 brain cancer do not make it past three to five years. "But 60 percent do," he quickly added.

"My goal is that I get to live a long life, where I get to see my son's and daughter's children and be a Grandpa and provide them with a good life."

Zoi, their daughter, is 15. Zane, their son, is just 4. The whole family could often be seen sitting a few rows behind the Kirkwood players during games at Johnson Hall, cheering for Ben and the Eagles.

Radiation, chemo and drugs might reduce the size of the brain tumor, but Jacobson said it always will be there. "It's hard to come to terms with," he said.

"I don't want to live my life with having a tumor inside my brain. I really don't."

Perhaps there will be enough progress in the fight against brain cancer that the tumor can be removed in "15 or 20 years," he said hopefully.

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In retrospect, Jacobson said he's been bothered by "stuff" the last nine or 10 months. Friends and family noticed that he was having some trouble with simple tasks, and also having trouble eating and sleeping.

At one point he went four straight days with no sleep. His wife made him see a doctor. "It's like my brain wouldn't shut off," he said.

Jacobson originally attributed the problems to deep concern about his father, who is battling health issues. An earlier doctor agreed with that assessment.

Now Jacobson knows his problems were related to the cancer, which is located in the part of the brain that affects decision making, personality traits and sleep habits.

The combination of his father's medical problems and now his own problems have been a double blow. "There have been a lot of rocky edges that have hit me this past year," he said.

Jacobson said he greatly appreciates all the love and support he's received from his family, friends, co-workers and members of the Kirkwood basketball team, led by head coach Bryan Petersen. He's visited with the team at Johnson Hall and plans to attend Kirkwood's home game Tuesday night.

Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery, whose own son Patrick has had a successful battle with cancer, has reached out to Jacobson to express his support and encouragement through difficult times.

"The best medicine you can ever get is just knowing how many people truly care about you," said Jacobson.

He gets text messages every day from the Kirkwood players, who check in and wish him well.

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He said he greatly appreciates the "love and support" from 18- and 19-year-old young men.

"Our group of guys have been amazing," he said.

Carlo Marble, a sophomore on the Kirkwood basketball team, is one of many players who are communicating with Jacobson on a regular basis out of respect and friendship.

"He's a great guy," said Marble. "He's always been there for us and now we're trying to be there for him. We want to help him pull through."

Jacobson's ordeal is especially poignant for Marble. His father, former University of Iowa star Roy Marble, lost his battle with cancer two years ago when he was 48.

Jacobson is anxious to start working with the team again, although he knows he has to pace himself and take care of himself before taking care of everyone else.

"They wanted me to have six weeks of bed rest, but I'm a competitor, man, and I want to get back out there with my team," he said.

Members of the Kirkwood community have been helping the Jacobson family with meals. There are plans for a "Go Fund Me" campaign to help with medical expenses. Meanwhile, Natalie Jacobson has taken another part-time job to help pay the bills.

"I owe it to them and I owe it to my friends who have reached out with love to give this disease the best fight it's ever seen," Jacobson said.

He'd like to become a spokesman and role model in the fight against brain cancer, encouraging other people while he fights the biggest battle of his life.

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Jacobson has a big, long scar on his head when they opened his skull for the biopsy. He received 120 stitches and 50 staples in his head from the operation, but he wears the scars in public and has even allowed a picture to be posted on Facebook.

"It's a scar that I'm proud of and I know I'm going to overcome," he said. "There's a lot more to live for.

"I'm going to give this the most positive fight that I can give it, and stay positive that I'm going to live a long life.

"God has bigger plans for me," he said.