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Of Strength & Good Courage : Doug Ulman Looks Forward To The Future

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Ah, August, that bittersweet bridge between the fond, fleeting days of capricious freedom and the uncertain challenge of a new school year; a season of hopeful speculation that the Orioles will go all the way. A space filled with empty boxes soon to be bulging with books, CDs, and athletic equipment designated for faraway dorm rooms; a window of wistful so-longs and enthusiastic reconnections as college students flock, like sparrows, to their homes away from homes. Drowsy campuses across the country are brought to attention by the sudden infusion of sound, color and motion. In the sun-draped kitchen of his home in Columbia, 20-year-old Doug Ulman bids farewell to a buddy bound for American University and promises to call him late when they will have more time to talk. He thumbs through his appointment book, refreshing his memory, reminding himself of deadlines to be met and speeches to be completed, and quietly contemplates the end of summer.

"Summer's almost over," he proclaims with a half-smile, "and I haven't gotten to do anything I wanted to."

His words convey far more than the momentary shadow of sadness that flashes in his eyes as if he'd just caught up with his own message. But only for an instant, for Doug has little inclination to entertain the past as he reaches, with indomitable determination, toward the future. Doug is, in fact, celebrating a milestone in his life. In August 1996, shortly after his 19th birthday and just two weeks before the start of his sophomore year at Brown University, Doug was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer called chondrosarcoma. What was suspected to be a benign tumor on one of his ribs, discovered by accident when an allergic reaction landed him in the ER, proved to be cancerous and was immediately removed.

As he recovered from the surgery, Doug was anxious to return to school, but the day before he was to leave for Brown, his doctor called with unexpected and unbelievable news. The pathology report on the tumor revealed it to be malignant.

At the kitchen table in that house full of light, Doug articulates his darkest moment.

"I was just completely shocked because I didn't expect it. The doctors assured me that 98 percent of such tumors were benign, so I just wanted to get it out and get back to school. Looking back, I realize how naive I was about cancer. I didn't know anything about it, so, as anyone would be when they hear they have cancer, I was really scared and worried. With cancer, you can't always tell where it came from; there was no real cause to mine,

no answer as to how or why I got it. That made me angry at first because I would have liked to have known, but as time went on, I just realized that I couldn't dwell on the negative because it would be too detrimental to my health. There are so many things that go into the process of healing, not just physically but mentally, and one little setback or one negative aspect can just throw it all off."

When Doug first received the news, he made the decision not to return to school the following day. Lost in the abyss of his own ignorance and fear, turned inside-out by the flurry of medical opinions and recommendations for radical and debilitating surgery and encumbered by his own physical weakness, he decided to chuck the entire semester. But that evening, after talking with a few close friends and his soccer coach from Brown, he realized that he wanted to go back, needed to go back.

Unable to drive himself and just barely able to walk, his mom, Diana, drove him to school as scheduled and got him settled in. The first thing Doug wanted to do was hook up with his teammates and tell the story of how he spend his summer vacation.

"It was pretty emotional. I hadn't seen anybody for the whole summer and nobody knew what to expect, but when I walked out on the field, everybody came up, and they wanted to hug me but they were afraid they'd hurt me, so they just kind of touched me and hugged my mom. It was tough, but it was good because it put everything out in the open and made people less hesitant to talk about it or ask me questions about it. I didn't want people to be scared to talk to me."

Friends and family have, indeed, proven to be the best medicine for Doug; they have been the markers by which he has navigated a wild and windy sea, and provided safe harbor when he grew weary. From time to time, Doug felt the need to relinquish the helm to a more experienced hand as he sought spiritual and physical respite, to follow the guidance of those who had already traversed the rough waters he was just entering. To his shock and sad surprise, when he sought out a support group to supplement the loving efforts of his family and friends, he found that there were none. Although the network of cancer support groups was extensive, it also seemed to be focused primarily on the elderly or the very young. As young adult in search of a kindred spirit, as a vibrant and accomplished athlete hindered by an uncooperative body, as a healthy, young man dealt an unfair and unpredictable hand, he found himself quite stranded with very few options.

"There are so many issues that are specific to young people, like what questions to ask the doctor, how to ask them, how to deal with doctors, how to deal with anger and denial; like having never been sick before, like being told that I might not be able to play soccer. It was a lot different from being injured because you know you're going to come back from an injury, but staring down the possibility of never playing again was much bigger and harder. That was the first time I had ever been in a hospital so dealing with issues like insurance and consents and waivers was a lot to handle on top of trying to get well. If you're a child, your parents run everything for you. If you're an adult, you run everything yourself. If you're a young adult, you tend to get lost somewhere in the middle. I'd be lying in the hospital bed and the doctors would come in and talk right past me to my

parents, but when it was time to sign an authorization form, then I would be drawn into the transaction, almost as an afterthought. All parties involved should work together rather than one person making all the decisions. Luckily, I had great family support, but I can imagine all the people who don't, and it must be tough."

One would think that a self-described once card-carrying pessimist might fold up his tent and go home, but that's not Doug's style. His sterling leadership qualities, as evidenced by tenures as a member of the Centennial High School Human Relations Team, president of the Howard County Association of Student Governments, and student associate to the Howard County School Boards, and his compassion for others in the same precarious position compelled Doug to found the Ulman Fund of the Wellness Community, a national charity providing free support services to cancer patients and their families. In addition to the fund, he is compiling a guidebook geared specifically to young adults with cancer which he hopes will offer them the kind of information and assistance that was virtually non-existent at the outset of his illness.

"Being young, there aren't too many people who really understand what you're going through. You can call friends and they can be supportive, but you know that they don't really know. That's why finding a support group was so tough. If there had been someone else to sit and talk with and find out how he or she dealt with this or that, it would have been great."

Since word of the Fund has spread, Doug is in constant receipt of calls and letters requesting various types of information, or just looking for a shoulder to cry on, all of which receive a prompt, personal reply. And some of them offer encouragement to him as he perseveres through yet another trial, melanoma, or skin cancer. A three-inch scar on his upper arm marks the location of the first of several malignant melanomas which have appeared on his body. A band-aid covers a recent excision from his left arm.

"Therapists say it takes a year to move all the mental baggage associated with the cancer from the front of your mind to the back. So, okay, it's been a year and I'm just getting it all back there, and now, this melanoma. It's like enough is enough, but I just take it one step at a time."

Staying healthy is more important than all the sacrifices that Doug has had to make over the last year. He doesn't mind not being able to eat junk food, fried food, or fast food. he's okay with sinking his teeth into a salad or pasta while his college buddies are scarfing down boatloads of whatever they can get their mitts on. He's comfortable admitting to meditating to soothing sounds as a means of managing his stress. He has grown accustomed to passing on passing the bottle, and, much to his roommate's despair, is dedicated to indulging in copious amounts of relaxation and sleep.

"At first, it was easy to say I'm not to drink, I'm going to eat healthy and get no less than eight hours of sleep a night. But as I recovered from the surgery and began to feel more normal, running around and playing a little soccer, it got harder to remind myself that I still have to deal with this, I still have to worry about it coming back. But since I've been

doing it now for a year, it's getting easier again, more natural. I just figure that, in order to find out that I had a cancerous tumor, a lot of things had to happen; it was almost like a fluke, and accident, even luck. And I feel that if this could happen when I thought I was healthy, then I'm not going to do anything to chance it happening again."

If the chondrosarcoma should reoccur in the same location, the big fear is that it would spread to the bottom of the lung, and should it reoccur, the same surgical approach would be taken. However, the new improved optimistic Doug doesn't think about it too much, until about a week before he knows he has a checkup scheduled. He doesn't worry about reading 100 pages for the next morning's 9:00 a.m. class either if he's feeling tired.

"Before, I was real conscientious about my school work, but now, if I can't get it done, I can't get it done. And with soccer, before, I played all year round and wanted to win. I wanted to start and play, I didn't want to sit on the bench. Now, whatever happens, happens. I still want to play and it's great if I do, but if I don't, it's not as important anymore. The whole experience has just really changed my perspective on a lot of things. I don't take things for granted anymore. I put my mental and physical wellness first. I understand life a little bit better. When something like this happens to a young person, they learn a lot quickly and grow up a lot faster. They realize not only what's important as far as family and health, but just in the big scheme of things. I think I notice more now than before when other people take things for granted or get upset about things that don't matter. Playing soccer at school, there are many times when you've been in class all day and you really don't feel like going to practice, but you go anyway, and something happens and you get mad at the coach, and you go home and complain about it and threaten to quit. It happens all the time. Now, I just tell people that when they feel like that to just remember how lucky they are and to think about how many people would love to be out there."

Doug is looking forward to getting his junior year underway, studying education with the goal of teaching middle school history. His mom vouches for his winning way with kids, and people in general.

"He's so great with kids, always has been. After on of his presentations to a class of youngsters, they all just huddled around him. They wanted to talk to him and touch him. He's just got the kind of personality that draws people to him. he's modest and soft-spoken and people just feel really comfortable around him. He's been a tremendous inspiration to us."

As to the melanomas, he is becoming a spokesperson for protection against skin cancer and has taken up the mantra, slip, slap, slop - slip on a shirt, slap on a hat and slop on some sunscreen. The malignant interlopers undoubtedly lurk somewhere in the front of his head, but he tries to leave them on the soccer field or the golf course, his two favorite ways of getting away from it all.

"I just want people to know that you can survive it, it's not a death warrant. Get past the initial shock, research it, sort it out quickly and don't take life for granted. The Dave

Matthews Band sings a song that says 'Celebrate! We will, because life is short and sweet for certain/sure.' I just wrote that down the other day to use in a speech. A year ago, I would have heard that song and not even thought about it. Now I think about everything I hear, I take everything in."

In the words of the Hickory Huskers' coach, Norman Dale, from Doug's favorite movie, Hoosiers, "No matter what the scoreboard says at the end of the game, you're all winners." Doug Ulman, by word and deed, has epitomized the quiet dignified struggle of the underdog to triumph over adversity, and has undertaken to ensure victory for any and all in similar straits. Doug Ulman is not merely a winner, his is a champion!