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Going for the Goal

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Surviving three bouts of cancer wasn't enough. Doug Ulman couldn't walk away from such an experience as if nothing had happened. So he decided to help others.

The Columbia, Maryland native isn't the first survivor to become an impassioned activist. But how many start their own nonprofit organization and raise \$75,000 the first year? How many wind up trading cancer stories with Sam Donaldson? How many are just 21 years old?

"A lot of us find out too late what's really important in life," says Diana Ulman, Doug's mother. "But he's learned it at an early age, and he's taken it to heart."

In August 1996, after a late-night jog with his brother, Ken, Doug had trouble catching his breath. His throat felt tight and swollen, and he thought it was probably a severe asthma attack. But at the hospital, a CAT scan suggested otherwise.

Within days, doctors at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore had removed a malignant tumor attached to Doug's rib, along with six inches of bone. The tumor was chondrosarcoma, a rare cancer that strikes 500 men a year worldwide.

"You're 19 and you think you're indestructible," Ulman says. "Then you're in a hospital bed signing consent forms that say the side effects of treatment are dizziness, nausea, and death. That's scary. I needed to talk to someone else my age who'd had cancer, but I didn't know of anyone."

Six months later, doctors at Johns Hopkins discovered more cancer - melanoma - and removed a malignant mole from Doug's chest. Within months, his physician removed another malignant mole, this one on his left arm.

Inspired by a Primetime Live story on cancer survivors, Doug started a nonprofit group to give others the support he'd longed for. He founded the Ulman Fund with the help of his family - his dad is a lawyer, and his mother divides her time between interior design and the fund.

Doug has created a network for young people affected by cancer, launching a Web site (www.ulmanfund.org) and organizing support groups in Columbia and in Providence, Rhode Island, where he is a junior at Brown University and a member of the school's Ivy League champion soccer team. In the coming months, he hopes to start support groups in Washington and Baltimore.

He's also lobbied soccer coaches across the country to urge players to practice better skin protection - he now keeps suntan lotion in his car, his kitchen, his golf bag, and next to the toothpaste in his bathroom - and he's persuaded Fila, Adidas, and First Union to sponsor his efforts.

The cancer campaign wasn't his first. At Centennial High School in Columbia, he organized blood drives and proms and treated his student-government position like a full-time job.

This month is a busy one for Doug, his family, and their army of volunteers. They're hosting the second annual Ulman Fund Soccer Classic Weekend on August 7 and 8. The fundraiser includes a \$75-a-plate dinner Friday night at Laurel Park racetrack and a silent auction featuring autographed items from DC United, the Redskins, and the Orioles.

The game Saturday night at the University of Maryland in College Park, starring some of the nation's best college players, is the embodiment of Ulman's two passions: soccer and cancer awareness. Last year's contest attracted 2,000 fans, raised \$25,000, and ended in a dramatic shootout.

Ulman, who has been cancer-free since June 1997, has been buoyed by the encouragement of fellow survivors. Sam Donaldson told him, "We're members of the cancer club," and cyclist Lance Armstrong e-mailed him, "We are the lucky ones. Nobody can have the perspective and the focus of a cancer survivor." Like Armstrong and Donaldson, Ulman feels it's his duty to fight the disease, and in many ways he's the ideal activist - a bright, charismatic young man with ambition and a growing number of contacts.

With so many goals - setting up a cancer chat room through the fund's Web site, producing a skin-cancer flier to go in every box of Fila shoes, testifying at congressional hearings at Congressman Patrick Kennedy's request - Doug Ulman is looking forward to graduating and working at the full-time job he's created.

"This is a perfect match for me," he says. "I like working with young people, and I've always enjoyed public service. I think I'll be doing this the rest of my life - or at least until they find a cure."