John Rose: Reformed Pessimist Credits St. Jude and TKE for Changing His Life and Outlook
Betsy Taylor | St. Jude

*St. Jude saved his life more than 25 years ago. It was the first of many blessings.*

John Rose says the day he fainted at work was one of the top 10 happiest days of his life.

He had stepped outside of his workplace’s Thanksgiving party in 2008 to take a phone call from his wife, who hadn’t been feeling well. Because he had gone through cancer treatment as a teenager and because he was a little bit of a glass-half-empty kind of guy, his mind sometimes went to the worst places. The longer his wife talked about her trip to the doctor’s office — the time she had spent there, the tests that had been run — the more he became convinced: She has cancer.

“I’m just calling to tell you I’m pregnant,” she told him. That’s when he passed out.

The next thing he knew, he was on the ground looking up while his boss and his boss’s son looked down at him, concerned. “I wasn’t supposed to be able to have kids,” Rose explained to the men a few minutes later. And now he was going to be a dad — another blessing in his life.

The first one had taken place at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

John Rose was a college freshman at Christian Brothers University (CBU) and a Tau Kappa Epsilon (TKE) new member in September 1994 when he was diagnosed with cancer.

The summer before he began college, Rose had discovered a lump on his neck. His doctor, and later an ENT specialist, believed he had mononucleosis, but the lump never really went away. Rose began his freshman year at CBU, where he worked in the bookstore. One day when he was blowing up balloons for a store display, the glands in his neck, called carotid glands, became inflated.

“I’m walking around looking like the Incredible Hulk, and not in an incredible way,” said Rose. “I looked really bad.”

That Friday, he felt too sick to attend a TKE party. When he felt even worse the next day, his best friend and roommate — also a TKE new member — insisted on taking him to the emergency room at a local hospital.
“I was on the top bunk, and my best friend, who is a big guy, reached up and literally pulled me out of the bed and carried me under his arm, put me in the car and took me to the hospital,” said Rose.

At the ER, a set of CT scans and a bone marrow biopsy revealed Rose had a type of cancer called T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia. “It’s a good thing your best friend brought you in,” the doctor told him, “because if you’d stayed in the dorm room for 24 more hours, you would have been dead.”

Rose was referred to St. Jude. He had tumors in 90 percent of his body, including a large tumor in his chest, tumors in his lymph nodes, and tumors on his kidneys.

His treatment began with a procedure called apheresis, during which his blood was pumped out of his system, “cleaned” in a centrifuge, and pumped back into his body. “After the apheresis, the tumors started to melt away,” said Rose. “They disappeared.” He said his medical team had never seen anything like it.

From there, Rose began a two-year course of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. “Without the know-how and protocols they put in place, I wouldn’t be here,” said Rose.

Rose had to put off pledging TKE for a semester, but, during Rose’s time in treatment, the TKEs went ahead and treated him like a brother anyway.

“A lot of the TKEs came up to visit me in the hospital, kept my morale up, stopped to pray with me, and pray for me,” said Rose. “Really, they were that support network I needed to keep my spirits up.”

Rose said the combined experience of being at St. Jude and receiving the support of his fraternity brothers has changed him. When he started his treatment at St. Jude, he said he had the “poor me” mindset, a tendency to feel sorry for himself.

“I think my experience with St. Jude and seeing how my fraternity brothers acted the whole way through; it’s really changed my perspective on life,” said Rose. “So hey, I’m not a pessimist anymore. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’m an optimist, but I’m a...”

He thinks for a moment.
“I’m a pess-optimist,” he said.

Really, he’s only kidding. He’s had an overwhelming number of blessings bestowed upon him: a second chance at life, the support of the TKE brotherhood, a fruitful family life, and an enviable career as the director of IT for an automotive group. His son is 10 years old now.

Sometimes he wonders: How does a person get so lucky?

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