

Failure was not an Option

I always wanted to be a father, but at 42 years old, with no children, I felt it wasn't written in my cards. The girl I was living with had moved back to New York. My consulting position with Technology Management and Analysis Corporation (TMAC) required considerable travel, so not having children fit perfect in my hectic travel schedule. I was scheduled to go to Honolulu for a Oracle Application User Group conference for a week and I was going to take another week in Maui.

My dog Hunter was a 110lb Huskey Shepard mix who was very protective of both me and my X girlfriend, Penny. I knew she would be the only one that Hunter would be comfortable with over those two weeks. I called Penny to see if she would watch Hunter and she jumped at the opportunity. I drove him to NY to drop him off and he was very excited to see Penny again. A couple weeks later, I picked him up and went back to Virginia.

About 2 months had passed since I picked up Hunter from NY, when I got a phone call from Penny saying she thinks she is pregnant. I suggested she go to doctor and get tested for sure, since pregnancy test can be wrong. About a week later Penny calls and sais, Yes she is pregnant and it twins!! OMG, I am going to be a father of twins!! It was a dream come true. Penny and I had parted friends so when I suggested she come back to Virginia she said yes.

My excitement of being the father was off the charts. I had a great job, and at my age, all of my oats had been sewed. The week following the news I was going to be a father, I prepared to go to NY and pick up Penny to bring her back to Virginia. Before I left I received a call from my life insurance agent. When I started with TMAC, I had applied for Life Insurance above the company provided coverage. This larger amount required me to give blood. I got a call from my agent and he said my policy was "rated" meaning there was something wrong. He said that they would issue me the policy, but it would be double the premium.

I had to call the doctor to find out I had tested positive for the Hepatitis C virus. The doctor informed me there was no cured at that time. The doctor reassured me I would probably die with it than of it. That did not help in the least.

My mind was reeling, how do you process this type of information given that in 7 months you will be the father of twins.

I go from one week learning the most exciting new of my life, to how much time do I have to spend with my twins before I die. When will the liver deterioration begin? It was a very dark time for me. Hepatitis C is dubbed 'the silent killer' because it progresses without symptoms. You are unaware you are infected until the condition is very serious. HEP-C

damages the liver slowly over many years, often moving from inflammation to scarring (fibrosis) to permanent, irreversible scarring (cirrhosis).

How long had I had it, how bad was my liver? You name it, I thought about it. Additionally, who could I tell? No one! I obviously was not going to tell Penny, the last thing she needed was to learn I have an incurable disease while she was pregnant. I had to deal with it alone and in total secrecy. On top of it, HEP-C was a communicable disease. Blood to blood. In 1999, the AIDS epidemic was well known and the stigma associated with a communicable disease made the silence on my part even more necessary. I had to fight this alone. But how? I was willing to do anything to prolong my life expectancy.

I began searching for any information I could find about Hepatitis or Hep-C. Were there any clinical trials underway to find a cure or an effective treatment. Since the Hep-C strain was discovered relatively recently to 1989, finding useful information about the virus was difficult. There were vaccines for Hep-A and B, but none of them were effective with Hep-C. Everywhere I looked for help ended with little or no information. I was going crazy in plain sight. I had to cloak my nightmare at work, keep the diagnosis from Penny, and pretend, I was this happy expectant father when in fact I felt I was a ticking time-bomb.

As my life has always been, God has either place me in the right place at the right time or put someone into my life to change my trajectory. This time He did both. Being in Northern Virginia, I learned that the National Institute of Health (NIH) main research facility was located in Bethesda MD. NIH is the world leader in researching incurable diseases. I learned NIH had several clinical trials underway and they were recruiting Hep-C patients for their research to find a cure for HEP-C. Finally, good news. The bad news was I had to qualify for a trial. NIH does not take any Tom, Dick or Harry who has HEP-C, you have to be physically healthy which seems like a true oxymoron, I have HEP-C but they want someone healthy?

As I would learn later, the experimental protocol's a person in the clinical trial would receive had devastating side effects. Being healthy from the NIH perspective was, at a minimum, are you healthy enough to handle the side effects. Damn, you talk about piling on worse news to worry about, and now its side effects. Little did I know the side effects were a piece of cake compared to getting into the clinical trial.

One of the acceptance criteria is to have a liver biopsy performed. I was sitting in the doctor's office at NIH when he casually describe the liver biopsy procedure. He will insert, a 1 ¼ inch needle that is hollow, between my ribs and extract a sample of the liver. From this sample they can determine how advanced the "scarring" is in my liver. I asked, "will I be put under to perform this biopsy", and his response was, "no, we have to have you awake

but we will give you pain medication during the procedure”. It’s funny how when faced with an incurable virus, and twins on the way, the decision was simple. Let’s go for it. I won’t go into the procedure except to say it hurt like hell. My liver “scaring score” was an 7 out of 16. I was a good candidate for the trail and accepted into NIH HEP-C clinical trial. I was about to become a 6’4” lab rat.

I want to take a moment to talk about NIH and the amazing people I had the pleasure to interface with. Ms. Park was my guardian angel, she managed my entire experience at NIH. My doctor, Dr. Jordan Feld was a Canadian hockey player, long curly black hair and didn’t look more than 25 years old. He was a lot older and was brilliant. I form a great relationship with these wonderful people. The staff at NIH, on a regular basis, deal with people who their only hope of survival is NIH. Their grace, compassion and unrivaled knowledge provides people like me with a sense of hope. They are truly God’s angels on earth.

Penny was about 6 months along when she was placed into the hospital for the remainder of her pregnancy due to her going into early labor. The last 5 weeks of her pregnancy was spent in the hospital. You can’t imagine her state of mind, not good. During this hospitalization time, I began the preparing to begin the protocol. I would have to give myself a shot of Alpha Interferon every other day as well as take Ribavirin once a day. Imagine taking an injection and a pill that made you feel, every day, worse than you ever felt from the virus that was being treated.

The were two major NIH milestones you needed to overcome, the first was staying at NIH over night the first 2 days you are given the cocktail of drugs, I will get into that later, and the second is, in front of a nurse show that you can give yourself a shot with a hypodermic needle. These two factors had led to a 50% dropout rate among people in the trail. Now for the night from hell. A nurse gave me the first shot of Alpha Interferon and I took two of the Ribavirin pills. About an hour later the fever began and continued for about 2 – 3 hours, then as I called it, the eye of the storm came, where I felt pretty good. Then the worst chills, followed by uncontrollable shivering came upon me. I remember I was so cold, I curled up into a tight ball. When the shivering finally subsided, my testicle hurt so bad from squeezing my body so tight. Is this horrid feeling what I would feel for the next 6 months? I couldn’t maintain this level of spasms. The doctor said the first night is the worst, but by the end of the first week, your body will have adjusted to the medication and you will only have flu-like symptoms.

I went home with two weeks supply of drugs and all of the needles, and other medical supplies I would need. The date was June 5, 1999, and on July 8th, 1999, twin boy were born 5 week premature. Penny was doing well but the boys were in Neo-natal intensive care

unit. Matt stay in the NIC unit for a week and Erik stayed two weeks. When I picked Penny up from the hospital, I had to tell her about the HEP-C, that I was in good hands and inside the refrigerator there are vials of medicine that must be kept cold. I showed her the needles and where I kept the medical waste contained NIH provided for the used needle. I am 6'4" so I put the medical waste contained on the top shelf of my closet.

As part of the trail, I had to go to HIH every two weeks to give blood so they can tract the effectiveness of the drugs on the virus. When I go there for my biweekly blood draws, the doctor would tell me what my viral load is. To give you an idea of HEP-C viral load, when they first analyzed my blood I had a viral load of 800,000. Don't ask me "800,000 what". The doctor said that when you reach 2 million, that's when you are in trouble. He assured me, my viral load was manageable.

With the boys home and me 3 month into the trail, the doctors recommended that I take the protocol for 9 months. They were seeing a drop in the viral load, but the virus was still detectable. During this time, the boys mom and I were having issues. It was the combination of Penny staying home with the twins and lack of freedom combined with my side effects of the drug. It was a difficult time for both of us.

I was successful in keeping it from work until myself and another colleague were on a sales call in Toronto waiting for our flight back to Virginia, when my backpack spilled open and two used needles fell onto the floor. My colleague looked at me like WTF dude. I explained that the clinical trail to him and that I was bringing these used needles back to be disposed of properly because I was being treated for HEP-C. He was so supportive of me from that point forward. I would later find out how support he will be.

I had arrived home from work and Penny came to me and sat on my lap and told me she had filed a restraining order on me for leaving needles around the house and the police are on the way. It was around 7pm when there was a knock at the door. I answered it to see 4 Fairfax County police officers standing there. They asked me my name and said they had a restraining order brought by Penny and that I was to immediately leave the property. WHAT? Penny had told the person we were seeing to couples therapy, that she had found used needles around the house. There were none. I found out later from my neighbor Penny who had been inquiring what the child support payments would be for someone making the money I did. I was escorted out of the house. Drugs and a few cloths, I went to my office and slept there that night. The next day I told my colleague about what had gone down and he offered his place to me to live until court.

Again, what I am about to tell you really hits home. When the senior executives of the French company I was working for heard what was happening, they offered or I should say

demanded that I stay in the corporate apartment they had. I have incredibly bad things happening to me followed by these amazing gestures of kindness. How lucky was I. Lets recap, I have HEP-C, I have a restraining order against me, I need to find an attorney, I cannot see my boys, and I have side effects from the protocol that would make most people cry, all while working full-time.

Fast forward two weeks when my attorney gets an emergency hearing with the judge. It is in court were I and my attorney learn that Penny had a tape recorder hidden in her pants. I learned later from Penny the person we were seeing for couples counselling, told her to do that and provided her with the record. What happened to her and the University she worked for is in the book. When Penny attorney divulged the recording of me being told I was going to be removed from the property, my attorney said he could stop it from being heard by the judge. I told him to let the judge hear it. When the judge hear the recording, she said "this is the most passive argument I have ever heard given the circumstance, motion to extend the restraining order denied, Mr. Cronin you can see you boys today". Wow, relief, but now I have to live with the person (Penny) who tried to have me removed from my boys so she could get money. Can this story get any crazier? Oh ya, what is about to happen makes everything you read so far seem like a walk in the park.

Fast forward, the HEP-C protocol, did not eliminate the virus so NIH stopped it. They said that when they develop a new protocol they would contact me. So the details of what you are about to read are abridge for this essay, the background can be found in the book. I will fast forward the events up until the WTF just happened event. I went to Rome on business and when I came home that was a note from Penny she had taken the boys to her sisters. No biggy. Then at work the next day I get a fax from her attorney saying she has taken custody of the boys and will see me in court. Fast forward to the same judge we had for the restraining order is the presiding judge for the custody hearing. The judge appointed a guardian ad litem to represent the boys. He asked for both Penny and I to give 3 references for him to contact about "Us". I gave my niece who at that time was a doing her internship at a hospital in New York as one references. When see was a freshman at the University of Virginia, my sister asked me to go visit her. My niece was an introvert, so I visited her probably 3 times her freshman year. When she graduated and was accepted into medical school, I loaned her money to go to Europe.

On the day of the custody hearing the guardian ad litem asked Penny and I to meet with him so he could tell us who he recommended to the judge to be custodial parent. He turned to me and said "I recommend Penny to be the custodial parent and it was based on what your niece said about you and your lifestyle" BAM, my fucking family, did the most dastardly thing possible. My flesh and blood, my 2 year old boys were the most important thing on

this earth. Why didn't she just say she didn't want to be a reference? Who cares, from that point on I never saw any of my family again. With family like that, who needs enemies.

Again, lets fast forward around 3 years, I had met someone from Illinois, we got married and she came to Virginia to live. Around the same time I received a call from NIH, my guardian angel, Ms. Park. She informed me that NIH had a new protocol and would I be interested in participating. I jumped at the opportunity. It was the same startup steps as the last one, staying at the hospital overnight, then beginning the protocol at home. To say I was "gun shy" about anyone knowing about this new protocol, needles, etc., would be an understatement. Since my work required me to be on business trips over night, it was easy to have the NIH overnight, disguised as a business trip from my wife. Thinking my wife would be a little more understanding than anyone I had dealt with so far, I thought I would test the waters before I told her anything about the drugs and the needles, etc.. Nope, when I told her, she proceeded to explode and say I should have told her this before our wedding since I knew I had HEP-C. She was correct, I should have told her. She then proceeded to tell her friends that I had HEP-C and went to the hospital to get tested for every communicable disease possible. For me, it was business as usual with the people in my life, being the worst people in my life when it came to HEP-C.

Of course the test results came back negative, but more importantly, I knew that I had to keep the treatment for HEP-C a secret. This decision to go about my treatment in secrecy was validated when we had a party at our house and many of our neighbors came over. At the dining room table, out of nowhere, she said, "Tom has Hepatitis C" wow, really!!

It was easy, to hide everything from her. I had a finished basement with a bar that had a small refrigerator. It hadn't been used and no one ever went into it. I hid the Pegylate Interferon in the back of the frig.. I hid the needles and the waste containers in the rafters in the workroom in the basement. Since it was a finished basement with a bathroom, I would give myself a shot as needed. My soon to be X wife never knew.

About 2 months into my new clinical trial for HEP-C, my doctor told me my virus was undetectable. ARE YOU KIDDING ME!!!!!! Dr. Feld and I gave a high 5 and hugged. I was cured, well in another 6 months. He kept me on the protocol for 9 months total. When I was finished, the big test would be three years later when I retest for the virus. Thank God, my virus was gone.

A cure for HEP-C was found. Unfortunately, the side effects, giving yourself a shot, giving blood Every 2 weeks was not a viable solution for the "masses". It wasn't until 4 or 5 years later that a pill form of the HEP-C cure was developed. For me and the second NIH trial I

was in found the correct medicines to eliminate the virus from an infected person. How lucky was I.

Follow up on the custody of my boys. Penny was a person who made penny's (no pun intended) and spends dollar. She got into financial difficulty when the boys were 4 years old. She moved in with me and gave me custody of the boys. She moved out and I was a single dad for the boys. As I look back on that tumultuous time, failure was not an option. In life many negative things can beset you and from people who you think are the most trusting. Forget them, keep on driving to the goals you have set for yourself. Eliminate from your life the people who have proved they cant be trusted. Trust me, I would not be who I am today, if I cared one bit about the people in this essay. You have no idea the power you have inside until you are tested in the way I was.