

## There is Life Before, During and After Cancer



Sean Flaherty visited an ear, nose and throat specialist for a persistent sore throat when the prescribed antibiotic he was taking for his misdiagnosed tonsillitis didn't make a dent in his ailment. Two days later, on March 31, 2011, his biopsy came back revealing tonsil and throat cancer.

The 42-year-old financial advisor was reeling at the diagnosis and asked for a valium, instead he got soothing words from his doctor, *"You know Sean, there's life before cancer, with cancer, and after cancer; and yours is treatable."*

That was Flaherty's launch point for beating cancer, borrowing the winning theme from the pop cult antics of Actor Charlie Sheen, *"I was going to be winning and drinking tiger blood from there on out,"* said the lifelong surfer and avid athlete with a bent to compete. Flaherty faced cancer as an opponent, *"I decided to take on cancer as a fight. My goal was to beat it. It's all I thought about,"* said Flaherty.

He really needed to stir those competitive juices, he had Stage IV cancer and his doctors decided to bypass surgery. *"Rather than remove the tonsil, await healing, then have chemo and radiation, they said you're way past that point. You need to start radiation and chemo immediately and we're just going to fry that tonsil,"* said Flaherty.

Translation: 33 days of radiation, five days a week. Three chemotherapy sessions were woven into weeks one, four and seven. He'd boomerang back to the hospital after this regimen for hydration and anti-nausea medicine.

Flaherty, now 48, had a beautiful life before cancer which easily rolls off his tongue. *"I have a wife and two boys, Liam 14 and Shane 12. I've been married to Katie for 24 years. We grew up together. We went to nursery school and grammar school together, held hands in seventh grade on Halloween, dated off and on in high school, got back together after college, and got married shortly after."*

Katie was his anchor during cancer, she watched him drop nearly 50 pounds, lose muscle mass, and supported the fib he told the kids to mask his illness-- dad was helping doctors test medicine on healthy people so in the future, they'd know how much to give cancer patients without them getting too sick. He wanted his kids to go to school worry free, every day. Katie held down the fort while Flaherty slept 18-20 hours daily, she fed him nutritional supplements three-four times daily by feeding tube and later, when the fog of chemotherapy kicked-in, she worked with his rehabilitation team preparing and parsing out food he could eat while his mouth and throat muscles were mending.



*"She was there during the most difficult times where I woke up quite a bit during the night when I couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow, foaming at the mouth and very upset with the pain."*

### **CANCER REHABILITATION – I WISH I KNEW . . .**

With cancer treatments behind him, Flaherty started recovery. Walking, slowly blending solid food into his diet, taking in his kids' ball games, regaining strength and participating in a golf tournament which was a mental turning point in his recovery. *"I didn't play well, but I was able to make it through two or three days of golf,"* he said. His road to recovery was supported by therapists and led by Dr. Michael Stubblefield of Select Medical's Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation and National Medical Director of the ReVital Cancer Rehabilitation Program. Flaherty's team provided the scaffolding for that recovery with nutritional guidance, physical therapy, ultrasound and Botox, the latter two treatments helping with nerve damage and muscle spasms brought on by the cancer treatments.

*"The one thing I wish I had known about is that around year three, I started getting spasms in my neck. It was like a heartbeat behind my shoulder blade. They call it ischemic patterns and I started going to the doctor saying I can't raise my hand over my shoulder anymore,"* he said. The burning from radiation had tightened his SCM [sternocleidomastoid]

muscle creating scar tissue along his clavicle. On top of that, his neck was locking up, preventing him from turning his head left. These hitches were a problem for Flaherty, impacting his ability to surf which was always a release for him. *"When I paddle, I have to throw the one arm over because the muscles don't go at the right time. So my upper trap (trapezius muscle in the upper back) tries to do all the work instead of my lower trap, lat, and my rhomboids (back muscles) don't fire at the right times, because the nerve damage has created a miscommunication."*

Flaherty said he has come a long way since then, with physical therapy a part of everyday life. *"I'm trying to relearn muscle movement by doing very isolated types of exercises that are waking up those muscles which is helping me with my posture, and I'm able now to raise my arm over my head, so paddling is becoming easier. It's not perfect yet, but it's just becoming easier."*

Flaherty is back to surfing near his home on the New Jersey shore. *"Surfing is very important to me. It's one of my major outlets in life, I've been surfing since I was a kid. It is probably one of the most calming things in the world to me."*

His family also keeps him centered. After five years in remission, Flaherty told his now older sons that he had cancer – and beat it.

*"I decided to take on cancer as a fight. My goal was to beat it. It's all I thought about."*

*Living well beyond cancer*

