

At 20-year mark, time to reflect and enjoy life

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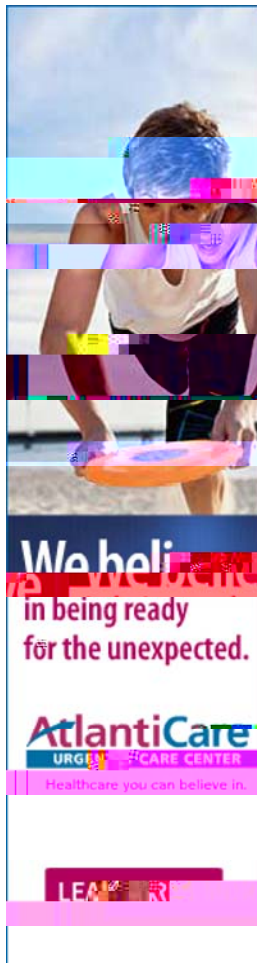


Gov. Christine Todd Whitman and press secretary Carl Golden.

[Carl Golden](#)

POSTED: Monday, May 18, 2015, 1:08 AM

There's always been something sort of milestone-ish about 20 years. It's accepted in most places as the standard to measure success in employment (20 years with the same company usually qualifies for a coworker luncheon or office party at the very least) and in marriage (the 20-year anniversary is designated platinum as opposed to wood, paper, leather, etc.).



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On May 23, 1995, I lay in a hospital bed at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton, N.J., and listened to the words of an attending physician:

"You have cancer."

Following surgery, for a year, I underwent weekly intravenous chemotherapy, washed down oral chemo pills every other week because they were too potent to handle more frequently, and struggled to maintain some sense of optimism, clinging to a belief that somehow all would come out OK in the end.

I kept up my daily work routine (I was serving as press secretary to New Jersey Gov. Christie Whitman at the time), scheduling my chemo treatments for late Friday afternoons so my wife could drive me to the hospital and back home, where I'd spend the weekend staving off nausea and dealing with a fatigue so deep I'd fall asleep in the middle of College Football Saturday.

A few members of the media with whom I dealt on a regular basis knew what I was enduring, but treated me no differently or more gently than they did prior to my falling ill.

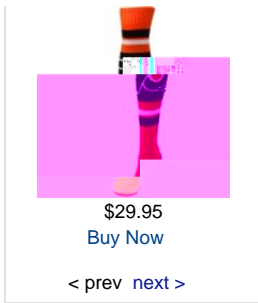
Aside from an occasional variation of "How ya doin'?" none of them pushed any further. For that, I'll always be grateful.

My physician counseled me that maintaining as normal a life as possible was a key ingredient in my recovery process, and there were a bunch of Statehouse reporters who contributed mightily - wittingly or not - to assuring as much normalcy as possible.

While my days for the most part were full and my mind occupied fairly constantly, many nights were very, very long. When sleep wouldn't come, it was impossible to ignore what did show up - worry and fear in varying degrees, concern for my wife who'd married me less than three years before, and trying to figure the odds of making it through.

Far too often, in the darkness, I stared at the red numerals on the bedside clock, watching as 2:30 turned to 2:31, then 2:32, hoping exhaustion would ultimately win out.

While physicians and nurses provided their expertise and skill, and while family and friends gave their support and encouragement, it is in the end a solitary struggle. It comes down to you vs. it, an "it" that's always there, occasionally dim but at other times overwhelming.



The understanding that there's no cure for cancer - always something of an abstract notion before - becomes frighteningly clear in this circumstance.

The "it" that I spent a year fighting wasn't ever going to go away with any sense of finality. There's no difference between conquering and settling for a draw. I don't have cancer now, but there's no guarantee it won't return. It might be difficult to accept that, but the "Why me?" feeling that accompanied my original diagnosis was just as hard to take.

I don't plan a celebration for my 20-year anniversary. Enjoying family as I would any other day will be more than sufficient.

It's been, after all, 240 months, 1,040 weeks, 7,300 days, and 175,200 hours. But hey, who's counting? I consider all of them milestones and measures of success.

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