

Four Walls

**Breaking Through Life's Challenges,
One Wall at a Time:
A Memoir of Battling Cancer**

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We did it.

Four Walls

When I was having difficulty coping with being in the hospital for a long period of time during my transplant stay, the doctor said something that resonated with me.

“I know it is tough being in here. It’s just four walls.”

I was trapped in that room all day long. It was just me and the four walls around me. I felt stuck. You only could stare at the wall in front of you for so long before you start losing your mind. The more I thought about the “four walls,” the more I realized I could apply that to many aspects of my life today.

In life, we talk ourselves out of stepping outside of our comfort zone. When we are faced with a rough patch in our lives, we say, “I could never make it out from this.” We tend to shrink away from life’s challenges. We want to stay where we are in life because we are afraid to take risks. We are afraid of putting ourselves out there and failing. We lock ourselves in a room surrounded by four walls. To break out of our comfort zone to achieve whatever we want most out of life or power through a difficult circumstance, we must break down those four walls.

Getting down the first wall is commitment. We have to commit to ourselves that we will make a change. It is one thing to visualize in your mind what you want. But it is a whole other animal to speak it into existence and start taking steps to make it happen. It is difficult to accept a new challenge. Why do you think it feels so nice just sitting in your comfort zone? You don’t want to move. You feel content where you are. When I used to be a runner, one thing we always used to say was, “The hardest step of a run is the first step out of your door.” You knew you had to get some miles in. You knew you needed to train. But did you want to actually go out and do it instead of just relaxing on the couch? Make a promise to yourself and commit to it. Knock down that first wall.

The second wall is when you first get the ball rolling and you are progressing through your plan. The bad news for you is, you've realized this isn't going to be easy. The second wall is that first time you feel like quitting. Every person in life has felt like quitting before. When you think of your role models in life, oftentimes, you are seeing the finished product of years' worth of sacrifice and discipline. They didn't always have it this good in life. They had to make it through some difficult times to get where they are now. Have you ever heard of someone who always quits on themselves when times get tough? Of course. Many people in life do that. Those are the exact people that everyone forgets about. Life isn't meant to be easy so don't make it that way. The funny thing about the human mind is that when we get uncomfortable and realize we are really going to have to work to accomplish something, we already make up excuses in our mind as to why we couldn't achieve it!

"Yeah, I couldn't finish that workout today because I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I couldn't get that degree I've been wanting. I realized it's just too much school to get there."

"I gave up on starting that business I have always dreamed of. I have too much on my plate right now."

Maybe some of those quotes sound like something you have said before, or maybe they don't. The point is, you will be challenged. You will be tempted to quit. But if you can remember why you started in the first place and remind yourself that the pain is temporary, you can persevere. Once that second wall falls down, you feel a breath of fresh air. You get a second wind and suddenly, your motivation is back. This feels easy again! You are starting to notice some progress and it feels as if you conquered your goal. Oh, but you forgot one thing, it can't always be this easy.

The third wall is what I consider the toughest wall to break down. It is when you are faced with adversity again even after thinking your times of discomfort have ended. The burst of energy has run out and once again you are searching deep down within yourself for more power to give. The same plan of attack that worked last time isn't going so well anymore. Those same excuses start popping into your head again. If you could find a way to stay consistent with yourself and turn off the excuses

you are coming up with in your head, that third wall will fall. It is better to be consistently good than occasionally great.

The fourth wall is the easiest wall to get down. You have already overcome multiple obstacles throughout your journey that made you question your own ability, but you kept going anyway. You are so close to winning and you could feel it. There is no way you would ever consider quitting now! Look at how close you are! The fourth wall feels like a little “poke” to knock it down compared to the others. When people are astounded as to how you were able to achieve that goal of yours, you will say to them,

“Of course I did. Have you seen what I have been through to get here?”

“Have you seen what I did every single day regardless of how I felt to get here?”

In most cases, they probably didn't. Do you know why? Most people see that end result. Most people don't see the pain and hardship that was required to get there. Now, all of a sudden, *you* are the person people are looking up to. *You* are the person people are trying to emulate. *You* are the person they think of when they are trying to knock down that first wall for themselves. So, I ask you, is achieving your dreams something that seems unattainable? Does getting out of this rough patch of life seem impossible? Because to me, it sounds like a matter of breaking out of that room to have locked yourself in. Remember, it's just four walls.

Introduction

At the age of twenty-two years old, I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML). It was a devastating moment in my life. Having no health issues leading up to that point had me believing it wasn't real. In a matter of minutes, my life was turned upside down. The entire life that I was expecting to live suddenly changed to the life that I was hoping to live long enough to experience. Up until that point in my life, I had taken many things for granted. Life experiences, time with family, friendship, love, and my good health. Unfortunately, some of the most beautiful aspects of life are often overlooked.

Over the next five months, I went through five cycles of chemotherapy. My first hospital admission was a four-week-long hospital stay followed by four additional admissions each of which were six days long. In between each cycle were home nursing visits, doctor's appointments, and even more hospital admissions to treat possible life-threatening infections.

After I had finished cancer treatment for the first time, it was the most proud I had ever been of myself. I had the euphoric feeling of having a life to live again. I learned to appreciate those tiny beauties of life and realized I had so much to be thankful for. But after just two months of finishing my first battle with cancer, I experienced a relapse of my disease. Hearing, "It looks like the leukemia is coming back," from my doctor is burned deeply into my mind. I will never forget that day, because I truly thought I was going to die after hearing those words.

I found myself back in the hospital for another month-long hospital stay. The life I thought I had escaped violently pulled me back in. The hopes of traditional chemotherapy ridding the cancer from my body was no longer a possibility. Now, the best way for my chance at a cure was a stem cell transplant.

Introduction

The reason why I am here and able to write this book today is because of someone else's blood. All of the blood in my body is those of a stranger's. The transplant process was difficult and rigorous, but it ultimately shaped me into the man I am today. I am not here to just tell you about all of the new perspectives, ideas, and thoughts that have grown on me through my battles with cancer. To truly understand how strenuous, anxiety-producing, and taxing it is to be a cancer patient, I must dive into the *whole* story. Not just the positives that people often see at the end of the road. It is time for you all to understand what happened behind those four walls.

You could argue that for the first twenty-two years of my life, I lived a perfect life. I was blessed with a loving family. My parents always made sure to attend every sporting event or celebration I was involved in. They supported me in every way possible to provide me with anything I could have needed. My older brother, Eric, did his best to bear with me as I tried to copy every single thing he did growing up. Whether it would be a new hairstyle, a new sport, or a new video game, I had to try and be just like him.

I always had a great group of friends to hang out with. Whether it would be childhood, middle school, high school, or college. Many of the friends I made during middle school are still my closest friends to this day. The friends I have made during my college years I feel as if I have known them my whole life. I am so thankful for all of the memories I have been able to create thanks to all the amazing people I have met throughout my life.

I started dating my high school sweetheart, Madison, during my junior year of high school. We had the opportunity to grow up together. It has been so much fun having one another as we venture through different stages of life together. She has grown to be such a strong young woman that myself, my family, and my friends all love so much.

I had so much going right for me in life, but I wasn't able to recognize that quite yet. I was able to transfer schools when I wanted to in middle school. I was able to choose the sports I wanted to be involved in and be able to excel at them. I got accepted into the college I wanted to attend. My parents

have done anything I could have ever asked of them and more. With the life I had, I almost expected everything to go my way. And if it didn't turn out that way, it had to be someone else's fault.

Despite everything I had, at times I came off as ungrateful. I didn't truly value the many amazing relationships I had with those around me. Like many people in their younger years, I constantly compared myself to others. I judged my success off of how I looked next to others. I was deep into the social media world. I prided myself on the life I portrayed online and not how my life actually was. Far too often, I wasn't in the present moment. I daydreamed about previous memories in life, whether good or bad, and thought about what kind of future I would build. So much of what I wanted to create in my future was for myself. The thought of helping others for a higher purpose was far beyond my perspective of life.

I am not particularly proud of the person I used to be. It's not that I was a bad person, but I had plenty of room for growth. I focused on many nonessential things in life and it reflected back on what I thought about all day. Being blessed with the life I had, it's easy to get too acquainted with that lifestyle. Getting what you want and not having to truly struggle for much. Although, it is a double-edged sword. Because of that easy life I had, it made other normal challenges of life feel "not so easy." At the time, I was a distance runner almost my whole life. Naturally, I was pretty quick from a young age. But once I got into my high school years and the competition started to improve itself, I started to fall behind. And what did I do to handle that? I quit prior to my senior year. I grew so accustomed to having everything go my way, that when it didn't, I couldn't accept it nor was I willing to do anything to change that outcome. It led to those negative aspects of myself that I wasn't able to confront at the time. If I wasn't able to confront myself, for myself... then life was going to have to do it for me.

I had just finished my first year of pharmacy school. The COVID-19 pandemic recently surged throughout the country causing a massive change in everyone's lifestyle. My only plan for the summer was to work two jobs and make as much money as I could. One job which I have been at for years was at a grocery store pharmacy and my new job working in a hospital. Three days a week at one place,

and three days a week at the other. Might as well, right? It's not like many places were open to be out with other people due to the pandemic anyway.

One night, I woke up in the middle of my sleep to the harshest body chills I have ever experienced. My whole bed shook uncontrollably as I shivered for hours in the night. With it being one of the first few months of the pandemic, I immediately thought I caught COVID. But when I went to get tested, the results came back negative. I found that both relieving and concerning at the same time. I was glad I didn't have COVID, but I could not think of what could have caused the chills that night. I had more questions than answers at that point.

Over the next several days, I continued to feel feverish and generally tired. I decided to call off work one day to stay home and rest. I remember lying in my bed and staring at a water bottle across the room. I desperately needed to hydrate. But for some reason, I felt like I couldn't get my body to get up and move. What should have been a quick walk to get a drink became a ten-to-fifteen-minute operation.

The elevated temperatures I was experiencing began to fade away. But I still didn't feel like myself. As I sat outside with one of my roommates at the time, I said to him,

"I don't know what it is, but my body can't maintain a steady temperature right now." Even with the sun beating on me, I didn't feel warm. As soon as it became cloudy or a gust of wind blew by, I had goosebumps on my skin. It wasn't making sense to me.

I came home from work one day and walked up the staircase to get to my room. I sat down and took a moment to realize how heavily my heart was beating in my chest. Oh, come on. I can't be that out of shape that a staircase would do this to me. Normally, I was an active person. I would go to the gym usually five times per week. With the gyms being closed due to the pandemic, I wasn't working out as often. But the fact that I felt out of breath from a staircase was alarming to me.

The last straw for me came when I was exercising in my room one day. As I was lifting my right arm, I noticed a mark on my bicep. At first glance, it looked like it could have been a bruise. But it

looked very similar to a type of mark that I had learned about in school called petechiae. Petechiae forms when there are inadequate amounts of platelets in the body which could result in minor bleeding under the skin. The mark was a bunch of brownish-purple dots clustered together. I later blew my nose into a tissue only to see blood come out. Even then, for some reason, I still felt hesitant to go see a doctor again. I was a healthy twenty-two-year-old guy. There couldn't have been anything dangerous going on with me, I thought to myself. Madison persuaded me otherwise that I should try to get everything straightened out and see a doctor one more time.

I arrived at the doctor's office. I explained about my previous fevers, feeling out of breath more than usual, blood in my tissue, and now the petechiae mark on my arm. As I spoke about my symptoms, the doctor seemed to act in a peculiar way. Any input on what I thought it could be she returned with, "No, I don't think that could be it." She decided to do one more COVID test because there was still a chance of false negatives and a blood test along with it. Once again, I left the doctor's office with no answers, only more questions.

The next day, Madison and I decided to take a trip home to see family and friends since I had a few days scheduled off from work. The petechiae rash was now visible on my neck and my fatigue engulfed my entire body. I felt worn out to the point that I pulled over to the side of the road and asked Madison to drive the rest of the way home.

For one of the first times since the pandemic first began, a bunch of my friends got together in town. I hadn't seen any of them in months, and I was hoping to spend time with them. But I couldn't get over how drained I felt. I decided to drop Madison off to be with everyone and I would stay at home to get one more good night's rest. Thinking that hopefully, I would wake up feeling brand new.

Diagnosis

I woke up that morning just like anyone else would. I came out to the kitchen, had some breakfast, and began thinking about what my plan for the day was going to be. I received a message on my phone from the patient portal. The message read, "Give me a call as soon as you can and go to the nearest emergency room." I couldn't believe the message. I was in denial that something serious was happening to me. I went into my room and called the doctor. He explained to me that there were some alarming results from my blood tests drawn two days ago.

My bone marrow was unable to produce healthy cells which resulted in a decreased platelet count, hemoglobin level, and an elevated white blood cell count due to a large number of immature cells being released into my bloodstream. After his explanation, he said, "And I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this is typically what we see in our leukemia patients."

I had no response. I was in utter disbelief. I wasn't very knowledgeable about leukemia at the time, but I knew it was a form of cancer. This couldn't be right. I opened my bedroom door to go back into the kitchen. Madison and my dad were both waiting for me. My eyes began to tear up and I let them both know that we had to go to the emergency room right away. I gave Madison a hug goodbye and followed my dad up to our garage. Before I hopped in the car, my dad turned around and gave me a hug. He knew that I was scared, and I knew he was too.

It was a quick drive over to the hospital. I approached the admissions desk where the woman asked why I was coming in today. I was too shaken up to answer clearly. I muttered, "The doctor told me to come here. He called to make sure the hospital was aware I was coming in." Shortly after, I was taken back to a bed where my complete blood count was drawn one more time. The nurses tried their

best to comfort me. They said to me that it doesn't always mean leukemia and that it could be something else. I hung on to that last bit of hope so tightly.

After about twenty to thirty minutes from the lab draw, they decided to move me into an isolated room which began to worry me even more. My mom who works at that same hospital came down to see how I was doing. She let me know that both my brother and Madison were on their way as well. To top it off, the doctor in the emergency room informed me that I was going to be transferred to The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. "They have world-class doctors there treating leukemia," is what he told me. It didn't make me feel any better. It only confirmed that this nightmare was becoming a reality.

I said my goodbyes to my dad, my brother, and Madison. I watched as they stood helplessly as I was being loaded onto the ambulance. I laid in the back of the ambulance staring out of the back window wondering what was going to happen next. On the ride down to Philadelphia, I received a few texts from friends asking what I was up to that day. I let them know about the situation but didn't mention anything about the leukemia yet.

After a long two-hour drive, we finally arrived at the hospital. By this time, it was already close to 9 PM. I was admitted to the seventh floor of the Rhodes building. Since it was so late in the day, there wasn't a primary team to make their rounds on me. One physician had stopped in to get an initial report. Due to COVID precautions at the time, visitors were not allowed to stay overnight with patients. So, my mom left the hospital close to midnight. It was a very tough night. Saying goodbye to my mom left me all alone. I didn't know anyone on the hospital floor, and I had received the worst news of my life. I didn't sleep a single minute that night. I stayed up with my mind racing the whole time.

The following day, the medical team rounded on me and I had to tell my story again to a group of five people. One thing to note, man, they have way too many people come into a patient's room when they stop in to see you. The doctor informed me that they had to conduct a procedure called a bone marrow biopsy to get a proper diagnosis. I was told that they would numb the area, my pelvic

bone, and then draw a sample of my bone marrow for testing. The needle actually goes into the inner part of the bone called the bone marrow during the procedure. Bone marrow is responsible for the formation of platelets (which help us stop bleeding), red blood cells (which transport oxygen around our body), and white blood cells (which fight infections). Once the area is numbed using lidocaine, a syringe is used to draw some of the fluid, or aspirate, to be used for testing. A piece of the bone marrow is also extracted from the hip to be used for testing purposes as well.

The procedure wasn't supposed to be painful, but let's just say the doctor who performed that initial bone marrow biopsy was shy with the lidocaine. And for that reason, I will always remember that first biopsy. I was in agony as the needle was inserted deep inside my bone. I winced in pain as my mom tried to comfort me from the bedside. The reality of my diagnosis was getting about as real as it could get.

The results of the biopsy took several days to generate. Due to the need for immediate action, both the team and I were anxiously waiting to hear about the results. The team previously thought it was a rare type of leukemia that would only require oral chemotherapy. I was thrilled to hear that I wouldn't require any intravenous (IV) chemotherapy and so was the team. The team was so thrilled that they flipped the lights on in my room at 3 AM to tell me the news. Good morning to you too, doc.

However, a day or two later, I was told that they were incorrect about the initial diagnosis. The correct diagnosis turned out to be acute myeloid leukemia. This type of leukemia would require traditional IV chemotherapy. Several practitioners had told me that the genetic make-up of the leukemia was "the good leukemia." But, of course, they assured me that no leukemia is truly "good."

I remember the moment when they confirmed I had AML. There were several practitioners in the room and the attending physician had told me the symptoms I was experiencing were due to the fact that I had leukemia. After she let out that sentence, it was followed by a long pause. I did everything in my power to not cry in front of everyone. I stared down at my feet and just hoped they would leave the room shortly after. When they eventually left, the tears started flowing again. I admire how the team

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