




David's Journey



Retired MU Professor David Oliver was diagnosed with upper throat cancer in October 2011. Through his popular site, “David’s Cancer Videoblog,” he has taught students, colleagues and cancer survivors a different meaning of courage. *Story by Marcus Wilkins * Photos by Nicholas Benner*



David Oliver and his wife, Debbie Parker Oliver, live by his unofficial slogan: "Have a quality day."

The first thing you notice about David Oliver is his smile. Whether he is strolling around campus, through downtown Columbia or across a stage to address a packed auditorium of intercollegiate athletics staffers, his pearly whites precede him. It's why perfect strangers feel comfortable with introductory hugs instead of handshakes and adoring students chase him down from opposite ends of Mizzou hallways.

So when Oliver, a retired professor of gerontology and assistant director of MU's Interdisciplinary Center on Aging, told his colleagues via YouTube video that he had stage 4 cancer, he led with his trademark grin.

"The goal of the video was to make people comfortable so they could see that I was still David," says Oliver, who was diagnosed with treatable but not curable nasopharyngeal (upper throat) carcinoma in October 2011. "I was not 'David with cancer' — even though I was David, with cancer."

That summer, Oliver had noticed growths on his neck he assumed were scar tissue from a previous surgery. After tests confirmed the cells had metastasized, he and his doctors discussed the necessary chemotherapy. One of those doctors was best friend and boss Steve Zweig, professor and chair of the family and community medicine department.

Zweig urged him to come up with a method for deliv-

ering the bad news, which Oliver had learned could be uncomfortable.

"When someone comes up to you and they know that you have cancer, but they don't know that you know that they know you have cancer, subsequently the conversation is awkward, or it just doesn't happen," Oliver says.

The video worked. It prompted an outpouring of support and emboldened the professor to launch a video blog to document his experience. Thus began the most important lesson of Oliver's career.

"I decided hey, I'm a teacher, and I have been a teacher all my life," he says. "I can teach people about my cancer journey."

REACHING OUT

Oliver has always been an extrovert. In 2010, he biked from Sedalia, Mo., to Jefferson City, Mo., to raise awareness for Alzheimer's research. He cracks up medical students during candid lectures about sex and the elderly. His charm is his most valuable asset.

He once used it to weasel his way aboard a U.S. Navy ship stationed in the Mediterranean. It sets up like a joke: A Swiss guy, a German guy, an English guy and an American (Oliver) are standing on a dock.



The four fast friends were admiring the battleship from the rails when Oliver suggested that, as a tax-paying American, he could coax the ship's crew into letting the quartet on board.

"I said, 'We live in a free society, and I'll just go over there and ask.' They thought I was full of it," he says. But Oliver's charisma won out, and after the deck officer cleared it with the captain, the group enjoyed a guided tour of the vessel. "Of course, I was the hero of the rest of the voyage."

Although Oliver's current journey is much more serious, he has kept his sense of humor. Before starting chemotherapy, he procured two "puke buckets" to use during bouts of nausea — one features a Kansas Jayhawk, the other an Oklahoma Sooner Schooner. Although he later discovered his drug cocktail included anti-nausea medication, the pails still show up in his videos.

"He is a tremendous Tiger fan, almost incorrigibly so," Zweig says. "Sometimes it gets him into trouble because he can be argumentative about it."

He almost always wears black and gold in front of cameras, whether they belong to the national media or his wife, Debbie Parker Oliver, who has adopted the role of videographer in addition to caregiver.

"When people think about hope, they think about it in terms of cure, and, of course, that's not where we can put our hope," says Debbie, who worked in hospice care 15 years. Now she's an associate professor of family and community medicine who conducts research on end-of-life issues. "We're big planners, and suddenly, our world shrank to six weeks at a time."

The Olivers have spent much of their blog footage addressing the caregiver's role. Although David documents his personal struggle, he addresses the often-ignored challenges for patients' loved ones.

His three daughters, two sons and four grandchildren have spent as much time as possible with their patriarch this year. Debbie has been by David's side through the highs — the pre-chemo, steroid-induced euphoria — and the lows — his pain and weakness during treatment.

"From my perspective, I have not seen cancer treatment in a positive way because hospice doesn't get those who get cured," Debbie says. "You try to be supportive. You don't want to show all of that emotion. So you bottle it up."

Following chemotherapy and the good news that David's tumors had shrunk, the Olivers returned to the Mediterranean for a honeymoon sequel.

"I always find the different people and cultures we encounter to be far more interesting than the sights," Oliver says.

LESSONS TAUGHT AND LEARNED

When "David's Cancer Videoblog" launched, it reached 10,000 hits within 48 hours. At press time, it was at 42,000 hits from 74 countries and climbing. He received a supportive email from a South American law professor at the University of Oklahoma — clearly unaffected by the bucket joke — who read of Oliver in a Peruvian newspaper.

The Colombian news outlet *El Tiempo* also interviewed Oliver, as did *The Associated Press*, *ABC Good Morning America*, *NBC Dateline* and *CBS This Morning*, which escorted the Olivers via limousine to a five-star hotel overlooking Central Park in New York.

But most important to Oliver are the students he has taught at Mizzou. Second-year medical student Mariah Dreisinger of Jefferson City, Mo., recently cared for her 56-year-old mother, Nancy, who had early onset Alzheimer's. Nancy died in February 2012 just as Oliver's journey was beginning.

"His bravery has helped me to open up and talk about her with my colleagues," says Dreisinger, who met Oliver at school in a geriatric care interest group. "On many levels, he has helped me be brave and more open about things. As someone who wants to work in palliative care and will have to give terminal diagnoses, I now know about many of the issues he is facing."

Oliver credits much of his courage to the advice he received from 92-year-old mentor Fred Zweig, his best friend's father. After the diagnosis, Oliver had for several days put off calling Fred, a student of Zen, Buddhism, Eastern thought and all things spiritual.

"'About time you called! Do you have a pencil?'" says Oliver, reenacting Fred's gruff but lovable tone. "I've got four things for you to learn: One, don't panic. Two, don't struggle. Three, relax. Four, accept it. It is what it is."



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David Oliver's dog, Chewy, roots for his toys in Oliver's Jayhawk- and Sooner-decorated "puke buckets." Fortunately, Oliver never needed the buckets during chemotherapy.

The peaceful list washed over Oliver's soul. He had planned for a battle of epic proportions, but as his guru said the words, he realized no one had suggested a more languid path. It is what led him to share his journey with others.

"I thought, 'My God, I'm in a medical school,'" Oliver says. "Why should I be spending all my energy fighting this when I could be doing other things?"

Oliver has since visited Rome and Istanbul with his sons' families, witnessed his grandson's high school football team win the Missouri state championship and recorded 11 videos (eight with a shaved head).

"We don't know if I will have three months, six months or a year," Oliver says. "But because of how well I feel right now, I refuse to shave this hair that is growing back."

As he runs a hand across his prickly scalp, David Oliver smiles. **M**