

## PATIENT STORIES

### THE HEALING POWER OF MUSIC

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I am a 78-year-old man, born in England. At the age of 14, my family emigrated to Canada. I lived here until I turned 21, at which time I embarked on what I planned would be a one year trip to see the world. That turned into a new life. I stayed for six months in New Zealand and another twelve months in Australia. After that, I spent six months touring Europe and two years living in Nassau, Bahamas. That is where, 53 years ago, I met and married my guardian angel, June. She accompanied me back to Australia, where we lived for 12 years in Sydney then another 20 years in Perth. We returned to Canada in 1999 and have lived in Halifax since then.

I was originally diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL) in 2004 and received Fludarabine + Cyclophosphamide + Rituximab (FCR) treatment, 2nd line, in 2006. What followed was an amazing 14 year remission. In February of 2020, I was diagnosed with MDS and was told that this aggressive bone marrow cancer was the result of the FCR treatment I had back in 2006.

Looking back at how I arrived at this point, I recall how in 2006 I responded to a number of options. Due to a less than stellar prognosis, we sold our business. We also sold our house and moved into a waterfront apartment. The big, life-changing decision I made, however, was getting involved in music. I had owned an old blues harmonica

AFTER MY DIAGNOSIS...  
I DESPERATELY NEEDED  
SOMETHING TO EASE



#### THE STRESS OF LIVING WITH CANCER.

but I really had no idea how to play it. Up until that time, I really had little appreciation of anything related to music. Until my original diagnosis, my whole life had been taken up with family and business, both of which were challenging and amazing.

After my diagnosis, however, I desperately needed something to ease the stress of living with cancer. I had friends who were into music, and over the years, had met a few blues musicians. A few of those artists would invite me periodically, to sit in on their sessions, where I would create some amateurish sounds on my blues harp. Over the next few weeks and months, as I slowly learned the basics, I fell in love with music! Pretty soon, through perseverance, I was able to contribute something meaningful to a performance.

On what would turn out to be another life-changing day, a friend who managed musicians approached me with the idea of recording a CD. I told him he was crazy! I felt that my skill level was not that impressive. However, with his encouragement, I asked myself, "What do I have to lose?" With his generous help, we put together an amazing band of top musicians. We were blessed when

Charlie A'Court, an extremely talented singer/guitar player, agreed to be our 'frontman'. We called our band 'Little Derek and the Haemo Blues Band'. Our first venue was a live concert, which was recorded and became the first of what would eventually be three CDs.

So there I was with my first ever CD. What was I supposed to do with it? A lightbulb moment happened inside my 'brain box' and I requested a meeting with the CEO of the fundraising arm of our hospital here in Halifax. In the weeks ahead, we worked out a way for me to create my own fund through the QE2 Foundation. The money raised would go towards helping haematology patients who were having financial challenges during treatment. From my own experience, I knew full well about the stress of going through treatment and how even small issues could get blown out of proportion. Of course, that just added to the stress. The fund was not created to pay for drugs or treatment but was there to help with day to day financial challenges faced by my fellow patients. It was managed by a social worker in the hematology department, and she was the only person with access to the funds. The decision on how to use the fund and who to help was 100% at her discretion.

For each of our three CDs, I wrote a song. For the first recording, I wrote 'Haemo Blues'. On the second, I penned 'Healing Power of Music' and for the third, 'You Don't Understand'. I have attached a link for 'You Don't Understand'. I hope you will see that this was the most meaningful recording for me.

Little Derek and the Haemo Blues Band never 'gigged', but a couple of times a year we would put on a fundraising concert. Part of that process included recording two more live CDs. I always took pride in advertising that 100% of ticket sales for the concerts and 100% of CD sales went straight into The Little Derek Leukemia Fund. That meant that all costs incurred in staging the concerts, as well as recording and manufacturing the CDs needed to be covered. I managed that through sponsorships and donations. A lot of my time and energy went into making those events happen. Over 6 years, my band and I contributed \$200,000 to the needs of patients, to try and assist in their time of crisis. To me, the effort I put into that project was more than worth it. In the year I turned 75 years old, the group disbanded, and I decided to put all my energy into my family.

Although we no longer performed as a band, that did not mean I did not play regularly. Whenever I got a chance, I would sit in for a set with my musician friends. My music took me to Cuba

where, for many years, I would perform at a resort. That new phase of my life started while on vacation there. The experience led me to become an agent and taking musicians from Nova Scotia there to play. Of course, I always played on stage with them. It was during that



*I have included links to two of my songs. I hope you enjoy them and they inspire you.*

[https://youtu.be/PVe2\\_QSBjmw](https://youtu.be/PVe2_QSBjmw)

"You Don't Understand"

<https://youtu.be/3vxRksB39gE>

"Haemo Blues"



MY ABSOLUTE BELIEF IN MYSELF (WHICH I HAVE ALWAYS HAD) AND THE FACT THAT I AM MY NUMBER ONE ADVOCATE IN ALL MATTERS OF LIFE, ESPECIALLY MY HEALTH CHALLENGES, HELPS ME IMMENSELY IN FACING THE CHALLENGING SCENARIO OF MDS.

period when I first got the courage to sing before an

audience and have been doing so ever since.

Over the past 16 years, my life has been amazing! I believe that my new attitude, combined with a healthy lifestyle made the original CLL diagnosis of six years

continue on for many more years. Finding that 'something' to take my mind off my health challenges, was invaluable in my previous remission. Music was the best medicine ever!

Now I face a new challenge... MDS is much tougher than my CLL. With COVID and my compromised immune system, it is difficult to get out and play. I will need to find other ways to keep my mind and body active.

I will leave you with this. My absolute belief in myself (which I have always had) and the fact that I am my number one advocate in all matters of life, especially my health challenges, helps me immensely in facing the challenging scenario of MDS.