

STANDING UP TO HIS FEARS: ONE MAN'S TAKE ON PROSTATE CANCER



Sanford Tollette

“Men, and particularly African American men,” declares Sanford Tollette, “have a tendency to bury fear. To ignore it. That’s why we don’t go to the doctor when we should and that’s why we die first.” The prevailing attitude is “if I leave this alone, it will go away.”

Sanford consciously stood up to his fears, scheduling annual checkups with his doctor a long time ago. Putting up with the uncomfortable parts of the exam. Proud to be taking responsibility for his health and able to take care of his wife and daughters.

A few years back Sanford’s PSA level began to creep up. “PSA” stands for Prostate-Specific Antigen. A higher PSA reading may indicate a greater likelihood of prostate cancer. Sanford’s doctor told him that there was nothing to worry about yet, but he would carefully monitor Sanford’s levels.

Then Sanford began to notice intermittent throbbing and sensitivity in his scrotum. “It wasn’t anything all that alarming, and it only occurred when I was really still, like during sleep.”

Sanford went back to his doctor and found out that he had prostate cancer.

“When I found out that I had cancer, my personal challenge was, am I profound enough, do I have the courage, to face this. This is a man’s ultimate fear. Like it or not, we kind of let this part of us define us.”

Sanford’s strategy for dealing with this fear was the same strategy he had used all of his life, whether fighting for civil rights breakthroughs in the 60s or developing innovative methods for dealing with at-risk youth in his 30-something years running the Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp. Sanford chose humor.

“I’m a nut.” Sanford states, deadpan. “I use gregarious behavior, jokes, pranks, to cover my fear. The first day I went to CARTI for treatment I looked around and realized that some of the other people sitting and waiting were in worse shape than I was. Prostate cancer is one of the most treatable cancers. Some of these people, statistically, probably weren’t going to

make it. My job always got me to thinking ‘what can I do for other people?’ I thought that instead of sitting there morbidly I would do things that would make people think ‘is everything OK with this guy?’”

“You see the same people, there to get treatment at the same time, and you really develop relationships.” Sanford smiles, “I became an instigator.” He pulled numerous pranks. One week he led his cadre from the waiting room to stand outside on the corner to see if anybody would notice them. “Since we were all wearing the backless patient robes we did indeed attract some attention.”

“On the day of my last treatment I wore a graduation cap with a tassel and played ‘Pomp and Circumstance’ on my harmonica. And we mooned the nurses.” There is, reportedly, photographic evidence of this.

“I feel like this whole process, the whole cancer thing, has been a rebirth for me.” Sanford stops our tour of his camp. He becomes markedly less zany. “If I hadn’t

stepped up to the plate, if I hadn’t gotten myself checked for prostate cancer on a regular basis, I wouldn’t be here today. The angels at CARTI, they’ve touched thousands of lives. I’ve been blessed by God just to be here and to be able to tell my story.”

“If me telling my story can help one man out there go and get his PSA checked then I will feel doubly blessed.”

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“I have good days and I have bad days. I’m fallible. I’m a human being. But because I didn’t let my fear get the best of me I am here for my wife and my daughters. Who knows how many years I’ve been given? It’s been five years. That’s five extra years for me to give to my family. That’s five extra years for me to give to the kids

who come to this camp.”

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Sanford stops a group of early teens on their way to lunch, “Where’re your hats?” Teaching them to take steps to avoid skin cancer. The discussion quickly swerves off into laughter. Sanford Tollette uses humor in all kinds of situations.

UPDATED PROSTATE CANCER SCREENING GUIDELINES

The American Cancer Society recommends that men make an informed decision with their doctor about whether to be tested for prostate cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends that men should not be tested without learning about what we know and don’t know about the risks and possible benefits of testing and treatment.

Starting at age 50, men should talk to a doctor about the pros and cons of testing so they can

decide if testing is the right choice for them. If they are African American or have a father or brother who had prostate cancer before age 65, men should have this talk with a doctor starting at age 45. If men decide to be tested, they should have the PSA blood test with or without a rectal exam. How often they are tested will depend on their PSA level.