

Let me warn you, this will be a long personal story this month. I hope you will indulge me.

Thirteen years. That's how long it took. A thirteen year on-going cycle of growing fear, sadness, anxiety, relief, happiness, and back to growing fear again.

In 2007 my then seven-year-old daughter Abrielle began having headaches. Not your normal, "Daddy my head hurts," kind of headache, but a "hold your head and cry" kind of pain. It would come and go, but when it came it was bad.

It didn't take Dr. Greta McFarland at Ashley Clinic long to recognize what it might be, and a CAT scan confirmed it. It was a brain tumor, about the size of a golf ball in her little seven-year-old head.

We headed to Children's Mercy where a young doctor there gave her about a 33% chance to live five years. A word of advice, never ask your chances at an early stage. Just wait for the test results. And stay off the internet medical sites until you have a confirmed diagnosis.

The neurosurgeon, Dr. Hornig, liked her chances but cautioned us just the same. The next day they attempted the six-hour surgery to remove the tumor. If the tumor was cancerous, we were looking at the full range of horrors that go with it, chemotherapy, radiation, etc. It wasn't. It was a "low grade" tumor, while not cancer, still could have killed her if not removed. The only treatment was removal and that was declared a success. For now.

Abrielle survived the operation and unbelievably to me, we were home from the hospital just four days later. She suffered no long-term physical effects. We were grateful, relieved and exhausted. But the doctor warned us we were not entirely out of the woods, that the tumor could return, and that constant vigilance would be required.

So began our thirteen-year journey. The doctor would tell us he wants to see her in another six months, or one year, or two years, each time requiring an MRI. Over that time Abrielle had so many MRIs during the journey that I have lost track of the total. We have had some incredible ups and downs. For the first five years we checked first every six months and then once a year.

When she was twelve we were headed for a big potentially exciting appointment. If she went five years without the tumor returning, then the doctor told us he was going to expand the time horizon greatly, maybe not requiring another check for perhaps five more years! In my mind I was already planning a celebration of that event. But, it was not to be. The tumor had returned.

This time it took two attempts to remove it. Two more brain surgeries. Two more times of putting her through that. Two more times of kissing my daughter and watching her rolled away on the gurney knowing how dangerous this surgery really was. Two more waves of relief when she made it through the surgery ok.

And then unfortunately, a reset to every six months of checkups. The sleepless nights before the trip to the hospital. The MRIs. And worst of all, the excruciating minutes of waiting in the exam room of the neurosurgery clinic for the results from the doctor.

But all of that came to an end about a week ago. It had been thirteen years from the first diagnosis and Dr. Hornig had long since retired. Our new doctor, Dr. Garcia, said, "It's been about 8 or 9 years since the spot on your brain has changed shape. It's just scar tissue from the surgeries. I'm going to declare

you, ‘cured.’” I wasn’t ready for that and neither was Abrielle. We were hoping for five years between checks, not that she was done forever. The doctor told her that her job now was to live her life. He went on to say that she is the outcome they always hope for in the clinic.

It took a while for his words to sink in for Abrielle and for Jen and me. Abrielle was initially apprehensive. The thought of not checking was, frankly, a little scary for her. I think she still needs time to process the news. It’s been part of her life since almost before she could remember. And now it is finally over.

I know that was a long personal story, probably the longest I have ever told in this column that I have been graciously allowed to write and that many of you have graciously read for nearly eleven years. So I apologize for that. But this long-term event changed me as a person and that has spilled over to me as President. It taught me lots of things, but two come to mind.

The first is, things don’t happen on my schedule at the college, even though I’m the President. I just can’t order it done and then it happens. Sometimes things take longer than we want them too, and that we have to be ready for good and bad news all the time. One of the first things I did as president was remove many of the dates in our strategic plan. I considered it either foolish or hubris to say in the plan that, say, in 2027 we are breaking ground on this building, or in 2030 we will complete a renovation. What’s the old line, “Man plans and God laughs.”

It is not to say we don’t have plans, of course we do. But exactly when those things are going to happen, that’s up to forces that I cannot control. So we are ready to move forward with various plans, when the resources are in place and the time is right, but accurately predicting that time five or ten years from now...folly.

The other thing is while we want things to be over quickly, it often doesn’t happen that way. Once we got her home from the hospital at the age of seven, I really didn’t think we would be back there when she was 20 before she would be declared, “Cured.” I think COVID-19 may be the same way for the college. While the numbers are improving and that vaccines are more and more available, it may be years before we have fully defeated it. Many are concerned about all ages of students and the effects of the “COVID Years” on their education. And then there is the economic effect of it which may last a very long time. While we are all hoping COVID and its effects were going to be a sprint, it may turn out to be a marathon.

Will enrollment return to pre-COVID levels in Fall of 2021? Will there be zero positive cases in 2021-2022? How long will we wear masks? How long before full occupancy of gyms, classrooms, etc.? It can’t be accurately predicted, and just like the return of the tumor for my twelve-year-old daughter, to do so may leave one greatly dejected and defeated. After that incident, I would tell myself, “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Wait for the test results, then do the next right thing.”

Along with our team, I’m doing that now with COVID, preparing for the college best and the worst simultaneously and letting the data help us make the next right decision. I believe that it might be a multi-year marathon, not a sprint, to see the effects of COVID slowly wane. Of course, I may be wrong. I’m planning and maybe God is chuckling.

But like with Abrielle’s tumor, it is constant vigilance that will be required, the cycle of good and bad news, to finally getting to that day when we will be cured of this disease and its many negative effects.

For now, I will celebrate my daughter's strength, grace, and poise to get through this horrible journey. One day we will all put this past us and do as the Doctor told us – live our lives.