

Standing Together: Going Above and Beyond for One of Our Own

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My darkest hour of residency came on August 13th, 2018 at 8:12 AM. I often wish I could not recall these details so vividly. This is when I received the news that my father had passed away. I had just finished a TURBT on a bulky, formidable bladder mass that reeked of high grade, muscle-invasive disease. As I spooned the sizeable heap of bladder chips from the drape to the specimen container, I began to rehearse the delicate dialogue that I would soon deliver to the patient’s family.

I broke scrub and kindly requested that the circulator arrange to have the family put in a conference room. Not a moment later I received a text alert on my phone. Then another. *“What nursing orders did I screw up this time?!”* I sarcastically deliberated in my head. I took a quick glance at my screen as I hustled to the family conference room. It was a message from *“Big Sis.”* Weird, my older sister never texted this early. In typical resident fashion, I prioritized work responsibilities over all else and blatantly disregarded the text. I paused for a moment in preparation to speak with my patient’s family on the other side of the door, removing my scrub cap and matting down the cowlick on the crown of my head. *“Beep, beep,”*--another text from *“Big Sis.”*

Something was wrong. I quickly opened her texts. *“Blair, it’s about Dad. Please call me. I love you so much.”* I immediately called her. *“Paige, what is going on?!”* She cut to the chase. *“Dad passed away this morning. I’m so sorry. He was comfortable and went peacefully.”* As if I had just sustained a heavyweight left hook to the belly, I felt every particle of air evacuate my lungs. My legs turned to Play-Doh. My eyes overflowed with grown-man tears.

My father had metastatic colon cancer and had failed chemotherapy. He was under hospice care. Any weekend I was not on call, I traveled 7 hours to desperately extract all of the life lessons he could offer. The lessons were abundant. Now that opportunity had forever vanished.

There I stood, about to play the role of the mighty urologic surgeon-in-training to my patient’s family. But I was broken inside. And freshly broken. I took in a giant gulp of air and entered the room. I put on an Oscar-worthy performance and delivered the intra-operative findings as if I had *not* just received the most crippling news of my young adult life. The patient’s family graciously shook my hand and thanked me before returning to the waiting room. The moment they were out of sight I buried my forehead in my palms after taking a Kleenex from the tissue box intended for grief-stricken families.

Now the story gets happier. Now I get to tell you how my urology *colleagues* became my urology *family*. I hustled into the operating room searching for my program director. I approached the operating table and whispered with a quivering, choked breath, *“My dad passed away this morning. Can I go home?”* Without any hesitancy, he carefully took his hands out of the patient’s abdomen, safely passed off the instruments and looked at me square in the eyes--*“Blair, take as much time as you need. Do not worry about work right now. Be with your family.”*

Within minutes, this news had disseminated to my program coordinator who had reached out to my fellow residents. Shortly thereafter, my phone was flooded with texts and phone calls showering me

with warm condolences and unconditional support. My co-residents quickly notified me that they had covered all of my call shifts for the coming week. Additionally, they would cover all of my administrative, OR, and academic responsibilities as well as my planned departmental presentations for the week. There was never any mention of expectations for reciprocation. Each resident delivered the same powerful message--*"Blair, we have your back."*

As I scattered my father's ashes into the brisk salt air and rolling waves of the Chesapeake Bay, I felt closure. I felt thankful. I felt thankful that I had the proper time and space to devote my heart and mind to the grieving process. My co-residents provided me with this gift. I soon returned to work wounded but happy, healthy and grateful—grateful for a cadre of urology co-residents that, in my darkest hour, had my back. I hope to repay them some day.