

"TREY'S STORY IS ONE OF COURAGE, LOVE, AND INSPIRATION."

- DR. PATRICK HWU

CHANGING THE GAME PLAN



TREY ROOD & CHERIE ROOD

Chapter One

Trey Rood

No child should have to think about cancer, even at fifteen. They do think about it, though, because they hear a lot about it. A friend's parent is diagnosed, a teacher gets the bad news, or a neighbor down the street goes into treatment. Sometimes it strikes closer to home and someone in their own family is told they have it.

So, while fifteen-year-olds do think about life-threatening diseases, it's usually because they see it happening to someone else. They don't think about having one themselves, and never expect to be the one to hear "You have cancer."

My name is Trey Rood, and I turned fifteen in February 2007. In the days just before my birthday, I was thinking about baseball a lot. I had just made the junior varsity team at South Forsyth High School in Cumming, Georgia, which is about twenty-five miles northeast of Atlanta.

As a freshman, making junior varsity was a big deal to me, giving me a chance to play up, to challenge my game. During my entire freshman year of high school, I went to some kind of athletic practice straight after school, and there was not a single day when I was the first to leave. In the fall, I played football; in the winter, I played basketball. Come that spring, I would be playing junior varsity baseball.

As a young athlete, though, football was my favorite sport and the one I hoped to play throughout high school, maybe into college.

I was feeling pretty good about everything in life. The only thing that seemed out of place was a small lump behind my right ear. It was about the

size of a regular marble, on the same side where I'd had a mole removed from the right side of my face when I was nine years old. Still, it wasn't anything I was stressing over. Back then, my family dermatologist, Dr. Michael Fisher of Atlanta Center for Dermatologic Disease, originally took a biopsy of my suspicious mole, then sent me to a plastic surgeon. My family and I didn't think much about the fact that pathology doctors consulted three times before agreeing the mole had a clear baseline. The pathology reports only stated it was "atypical," which we took to mean benign (non-cancerous). The doctors told us the mole was nothing to worry about, and it was only removed as a preventive measure.

Now, at age fifteen, there was this lump located on the same side where the mole used to be but the lump was behind my ear. It didn't hurt or get in the way of anything, but it had been there since November and didn't seem to be going away. I just pretty much ignored it and didn't think it would be anything to worry about.

While my parents, Charlie and Cherie, were also excited I made it onto the junior varsity baseball team, my mom wasn't as laid-back as I was about the lump behind my ear. She's like that, though—a go-getter type who wants to fix things. It wasn't a surprise when she made an appointment with the doctor for me.

I didn't know it at the time, but that appointment would be the first inning—the first kick-off—of the most important game in life that I've ever played.

Cherie Rood

Any mother is happy when she sees that her child is happy. Trey is my firstborn. He's a pretty easygoing kid, the kind of boy everyone likes. He's got a sensitive and very kind personality, and doesn't get stressed easily. Trey started sports at a very young age. Even with his calm demeanor, he could be as competitive as the next player on any team.

When Trey made the junior varsity baseball team, I loved the way his eyes shone with enthusiasm as he shared the news with his dad and me.

The happiness didn't reflect pride, like thinking he was better than the rest. He was excited about getting the chance to become better at something. It was an honor for him to be chosen—something he (and his father and I) didn't expect his freshman year of high school. Trey put in great effort at try-outs. Although his making junior varsity was unexpected, it sure was a great “wow” moment for us as parents!

It's strange, though, how happiness can feel threatened in an instant, and how everything familiar can suddenly feel surreal. A room you know as well as your name becomes foggy and foreign when the unexpected enters. This was the atmosphere that invaded my home office one night, when Trey strolled in to talk about school, sports, and other things that take center stage in the mind of someone just shy of his fifteenth birthday. We had enjoyed many conversations in this room, but the comfortable familiarity of this night changed the second I noticed something lurking ominously behind Trey's right ear. Peering closer, I saw that it was a lump, maybe around half an inch in diameter.

“Trey, what is that?” I asked, trying not to sound, or feel, too alarmed.

“This?” He said, touching it with the casual nonchalance of a teenager who has better things to think about, like his new learner's permit, friends, and sports. “Just a little lump, I guess.”

“How long has it been there?”

“A couple of months.”

A couple of months? In my head, a million thoughts rushed in at once—all of them screaming cancer. Surely this wouldn't be the start of something bad. I tried to make all the thoughts go away, but I couldn't get my mind off it. I had to keep telling myself, it would be okay, stay positive, but there was just something in the back of my mind that wouldn't let it go.

I wanted to cover my ears, as if to block out the ceaseless chatter in my mind. I tried to hold the thoughts at bay, mentally denying the worst-case scenario. I went into survival mode and grounded myself in being proactive.

“We need to get that looked at,” I said, forcing my voice to stay calm and steady despite the fear assaulting my thoughts. As I said the words, my mind was already rearranging my to-do list; investigating that lump moved straight

to the top. I called Trey's pediatrician first thing in the morning, hoping this would prove to be nothing that a round of antibiotics wouldn't take care of. That's what I told Trey, for both his comfort and mine. After all, Trey had made JV baseball as a freshman! I was so proud of him; I couldn't let myself get down about this. Playing high school baseball would be a great privilege for him. I couldn't dampen his excitement with my motherly worries. I tried to focus on other things, and told myself it was just a swollen lymph node. It couldn't be cancer.



Charlie and Trey proud of the day's catch!

After Trey left my office, I made a beeline to the family room where my husband Charlie was watching television. As I passed through the hallway and kitchen into the family room, I was hyper-aware of the family pictures hanging on the walls, the backpacks and textbooks splayed out, and other bits and pieces that represented our active home and two teenage boys. This was our normal life—who we were as a family, and everything we knew and wanted life to be.

As I took in these everyday surroundings, though, my intuition—that “mother’s instinct”—kicked in, as if warning that our lives were about to change. A chilling whisper as well as a burning affirmation, it just seemed to rise up from deep inside me, strong and unrelenting, no matter how hard I tried to shake it off.

I wasn't exactly sure how Charlie would respond to this discovery of Trey's lump. There had been a lot of cancer in Charlie's family, with Hodgkin's

disease having taken his father at a young forty-five years of age. Most of our family had been healthy and blessed in many ways, but one of my greatest, longtime fears was that cancer would find its way to one of us. Yet, I had never allowed myself to think the disease would target one of my boys—and I definitely never imagined it was something any family member would face before adulthood.

“Charlie, Trey has this lump behind his ear,” I said bluntly. “I’m calling the doctor tomorrow.”

Charlie turned his attention away from the TV and toward me. He didn’t ask me what I thought it was. Was he thinking it might be a virus? Strep throat? An injury? For a second, I wondered if he already knew the answer, the one I feared. He agreed that a check-up was in order, and that was the extent of our conversation.

Charlie’s not one to wear his emotions on his sleeve. I realized that he might not be as alarmed as I was, so I decided to keep my feelings to myself for the time being. I felt like if I said out loud what I thought the lump was, it might actually be true. Scared and not knowing exactly where to start, I left the family room and just acted like this was going to be okay. Fear plagued my emotions. I knew I had to be strong. Surely nothing bad could come of this as long as I didn’t think about it or say anything, right? I decided not to even tell many friends about it, so I wouldn’t overanalyze the situation more than I already was. But deep down inside, it felt like a bomb had exploded.

Charlie Rood

Cancer wasn’t the first thought that came to mind when Cherie told me about the lump behind our son’s ear. I don’t know why I didn’t immediately start to worry about it, though. Cancer wasn’t a stranger to my family. We not only lost my dad to it, but also his father and grandfather and one of his siblings. Everyone in the family had a different type of cancer, and none of the cancers were related. I wonder if there’s something in the family DNA that makes us more susceptible. I’ve thought about that for a long time, but still didn’t make an immediate connection between cancer and the lump behind Trey’s ear.

Cherie made Trey's appointment with his pediatrician, who sent him to an ear-nose-throat (ENT) specialist after an initial examination. Because it was near Trey's parotid gland, which is a salivary gland that makes saliva, the ENT recommended the lump be removed. But first, he performed an aspiration biopsy, where a fine needle extracts a small amount of tissue from the parotid to test for the presence of malignant cells. We got the result fairly quickly, and it was benign, which was a relief. Following the biopsy on a separate visit, Trey required surgery to remove the lump. I still had lingering concerns, but pushed them aside. The doctor didn't seem worried, so I wasn't going to be either. He even said surgery could wait until after spring break, the first week of April. This was also around the middle of baseball season, and I knew Trey wouldn't be happy about his time on the field being interrupted.

Some people wondered why Cherie and I didn't just try to postpone the surgery until end of season, but we were too anxious. Even though the lump wasn't setting off any alarms with the doctor, it was still something that wasn't supposed to be there. We wanted it gone.

Cherie

Each year for spring break the boys and I took our traditional vacation, which most of the time was a cruise with friends. Trey and his brother Wes went to school with or from the neighborhood. It had become a trip where the moms would take all the kids to keep it simple. So the dads all got their own break!

Spring break 2007 arrived, and Trey, Wes, and I boarded the ship. It was a week of balmy, Caribbean breezes, lots of sunshine, and me—a worried mother who just couldn't relax. Trey's surgery was scheduled just after our return home, and no one but me understood my big worries over a small lump. It was that foreboding intuition, and I just couldn't take a vacation from reality.

No matter where I was on the ship or the islands we visited, my intuition loomed over me like a dark storm cloud, ready to shower me with all sorts of life-threatening scenarios as I thought about Trey. He didn't seem concerned. Neither did Charlie or Wes! It appeared to be just me, even though I'm generally

an upbeat person. I'm all about positivity, and I'm the first one in our family to find a way of combatting anything. Trey's lump, though, was a different story. Any good feelings I had following the aspiration biopsy were fading quickly. My very soul was seasick, churning with a nauseating uncertainty. Though I tried hard to enjoy the onboard fun and port excursions, I was only going through the motions.

We returned home from our week at sea and prepared for Trey's scheduled surgery. The closer the date came, the more pressure I felt building within me. I tried to stay busy and keep my mind off the bad stuff, but as soon as I thought the anxiety was conquered, it began to creep back in in the form of "what if?" What if Trey has cancer? A taunting answer would follow. It rattled me to the core: This is going to happen.

The lump was removed, followed by days of waiting for results. These were some of the longest hours of my life. The seemingly slow movement of time nearly put me over the edge. I desperately wanted answers, but was also terrified at the thought of them. Even though my cell phone never left my side, I was constantly checking it to make sure I hadn't missed any messages from the ENT doctor. I called his office day after day to see if the pathology report was in, but was always given the same frustrating answer: not yet.

I tried to subdue my anxiety and threw myself into my sales job, which allowed me to get out of the house, making calls and visits with clients. Yet, it didn't make the phone ring any sooner, and I needed that phone to ring. Good or bad, whatever news waited on the other end was news that would impact my family, especially Trey. It would decide if our lives continued as normal, or if they would be completely and forever changed. I couldn't help but feel like the waiting game was exceptionally cruel. Mostly, I hated the knowledge that my family's fate was pending and that I was powerless to speed up test results. I just needed to know: Was Trey okay or not?

It was April 12, 2007, when the call came in. I will forever remember exactly where I was—in my car on my way home from work, about three miles from the house. The ENT doctor called to deliver the word we had hoped and prayed we wouldn't hear: Malignant.

"Malignant . . . what?" I asked.

It's a word that never precedes good news, but sometimes it's quickly followed with assurance that the prognosis is hopeful, even in more advanced stages. You don't hear that, though, when the malignant cancer is melanoma.

For someone who, deep down, had sensed for a while that something was seriously wrong, I immediately sought comfort through my denial.

"No way," I argued. "This is not real. What about the clean biopsy and those benign cells?"

"Melanoma can hide in biopsies," the doctor explained. This is the problem with biopsies made by aspiration, we learned. The doctor inserts a needle into a suspicious lump and withdraws whatever is in the vicinity of its point. If healthy cells happen to be in that specific area, then that's what gets retrieved and analyzed. If malignant cells are in that area, then that's what gets extracted for analysis.

More questions flooded my brain, so many that I could barely grasp one before another charged up on its heels. I was a stranger to the world of melanoma, but listened amid a growing cold sweat as this doctor explained that it's one of the deadliest types of cancer there is. It's very treatable when caught early, but Trey's didn't appear to have been caught early enough. Though they had not yet determined just how progressed his cancer was, the biopsy indicated that the best we could hope for was stage III—meaning it had spread to nearby lymph nodes and areas of the skin, but not to vital organs. The bottom line: It was serious, life-threatening, and any treatment options would be aggressive.

I had one hand on the steering wheel and the other gripping my cell phone. I'm not sure how I processed the news without careening right off the winding back roads that led into my neighborhood. The landscape outside my car window was a combination of quiet countryside and residential community, but now it all appeared a blur of colors, lacking any defining lines, just a distorted fuzzy picture—a good analogy for how our lives suddenly seemed.

My son had melanoma. My seemingly healthy, athletic, fifteen-year-old son had melanoma—an aggressive, merciless form of cancer that didn't care

how young he was, how much living he still had to do, and how much I loved him. It didn't care, and even worse, it felt bigger than all of us.

What I remember next is fumbling with my cell phone as I quickly called Charlie's office. I don't really recall how I told him. I just remember he said he was leaving work that very minute.

Charlie

How could they have screwed that up?! That was my first thought after Cherie called me about the results. Based on what we were led to think earlier from a "clean" biopsy and surgery performed under no big rush, I was in a state of shock. The shock, though, wasn't deep enough to withhold the anger over what felt like gross misinformation. This was our son they were talking about, a human being—not a car or a boat the mechanic tells you needs a little more work than you originally estimated.

It was incredible how quickly life shifted. In one phone call, I went from thinking about Wes's lacrosse game that night to figuring out how to tell Trey he had cancer.

Cherie was devastated, as any mother would be, fighting to be strong and hold back her emotions, but unable to. How was a mother to cope, or imagine her fifteen-year-old taking this kind of news? How did she fear this might affect him? I could feel the incredible pain she felt for him, and I knew she couldn't imagine being the one to face him and deliver the absurdity of this devastating news.

She had also been on the Internet, where Google searches called up an overwhelming mountain of information, none of it encouraging. I mean, none of it. Whether stage III or stage IV, our son would be facing a brutal monster that acts fast—and it usually came out the winner.

Men have moments with their sons that they never forget. From the day they're born, we look forward to such moments, imagining those things that guys bond over—the glory of reeling in a big fish together, the mutual thumbs-up when he's just made a great play on the field, the pat on the back

when he tells you he just might love that girl he's been seeing. What you never imagine is a father-son moment forever marked by the word "cancer." Despite having lived my whole life in a family that had heard it a lot, I was no more prepared for it than someone who's never experienced it with a loved one.

People have asked me how I did it: How did I break the news? What did I say? How did I say it? How do you tell your child he has cancer? There's really no good way you can say something like that to anyone, much less a teenage boy who thinks the toughest battle he's got in the immediate future is the rigors of spring football practice.

Our game would be different, our season tougher—and that's what I told Trey. "There's been a change of plans." That day was the moment that changed the game plan forever.