

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE After Cancer, a Second Act

After Dr. Joshua Grossman underwent his second neck dissection for papillary carcinoma of the thyroid gland in 1986, he believed he might not have much time to live. So, at age 45, he decided to audition for a role in a Johnson City (Tenn.) Community Theater production of Irving Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun."

"I'd always wanted to do community theater," said Dr. Grossman, a Johnson City-based internist. "I got a kick in my fanny from my cancer, and I figured, well, I'll get in a couple of shows, and then I'll croak. I actually thought I was dying."

He was cast as Chief Sitting Bull and went on not only to beat his cancer, but also to earn roles in several subsequent productions staged by area theaters, including Gonzales in Tennessee Williams's "Summer and Smoke," Padre Perez in "Man of La Mancha," and Mario in "Ballroom." All the while serving as a full Colonel in the U. S. Army Medical Corps, from which he retired in 2000.

"When I did 'Annie Get Your Gun,' the night work was being taken over by the interns and residents," recalled Dr. Grossman, who spent most of his career working at a local Veterans Affairs Medical Center. "The workload was more than 40 hours a week, but it wasn't quite as heavy as a practicing physician's, which is one of the reasons why I was in the VA: so I could spend a little more time with my wife and kids."

In addition, he has served as a theater usher, worked the lighting and other technical jobs, and helped build and disassemble sets. "I also tidied up the theater so much that one of our late community theater actors and volunteer

set builders called me the garbage man. I would sift through it because angle brackets and other things were mistakenly thrown in there that could be reused in future productions," he said.

Along the way he learned to respect the talents of master playwrights such as Tennessee Williams. He and his fellow cast members held frequent discussions in the green room about what message Williams was trying to convey in his plays. "We could never reach consensus as to what he was trying to get at," he said. "There's a feeling in general that the I.Q. of poets and playwrights is off the scale."

Dr. Grossman learned the challenges of sticking to a character. His role as Gonzalez in "Summer and Smoke" called for his character to forcefully grab the shirt of a young doctor, who was being played by a man who had been one of Dr. Grossman's former Cub Scouts when he was a scout leader. "It took many hours of blocking rehearsal before I could do that," said Dr. Grossman, whose most recent role was that of Joey "the Lump" Marzetti in a fall 2007 dinner theater production of "Funeral for a Gangster," penned by Eileen Moushey.

Dr. Grossman said that his brush with cancer motivated him to take up another avocation. Prior to starting his undergraduate studies at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, he had appeared as a ballroom dancer for 1 week on "The Buddy Dean Show," a Baltimore-based teen dance television program that featured appearances by the



Dr. Joshua Grossman is shown with his wife Mickey (far left) and Proud Annie Mystery Theater cast members.

Cordettes, Johnny Mathis, and Frankie Avalon, but Western square dancing had always intrigued him. So he and his wife, Mickey, enrolled in classes at a local university to further develop their ballroom dancing proficiency and to learn Western square dancing. Looking back, Dr. Grossman credits his brush with cancer for motivating him to pursue the avocations he'd long wished to take a crack at. "It's fair to say that my cancer gave me a fairly swift kick in my bottom and got me out into my community," he said. ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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