

Brain tumor can't keep runner from Boston Marathon

16 months after learning of brain tumor, 24-year-old tackles Boston Marathon

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We don't really know where the finish line will be, or exactly when we'll get there.

That's a truth that 24-year-old Will Tarantino says he and his family have accepted over the past 16 months, since he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor that is all but guaranteed to shorten his life. The important thing for him, he says, is to try to appreciate the journey.

Tarantino, whose family lives in Monterey, says he'll feel grateful for another decade of life, although the average life span of a person with his affliction is three to four years. He's fighting back with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and currently is in remission. But his doctors say this type of cancer inevitably returns with a vengeance.

His reaction?

"We all have limited time, you know? I probably just have a little bit less. So I'll keep doing as many of the things I really want to do with my life, so I'll hopefully have fewer regrets later, when things start heading south."

He's not the type to sit and wait for that next CT scan or MRI, which is why Tarantino plans to be at the starting line at today's Boston Marathon, a

grueling, 26.2-mile race he expects to run in a smoldering time of about 2½ hours.

"He's truly a remarkable human being," says Dr. Roger Shiffman, one of Tarantino's oncologists. "I've had patients who went through radiation and chemotherapy and maintained a fairly vigorous exercise regimen, but to run a marathon? That's a remarkable feat."

More incredible yet is this: A year ago, just three months after brain surgery, Tarantino finished seventh overall at his first-ever marathon, the Big Sur International, in 2 hours, 45 minutes. He had no hair that day — it had fallen out from the chemo — and he covered his bald head with the surgical scrubs cap Dr. Michael McDermott of the University of California-San Francisco wore the day he removed an avocado-sized growth from Tarantino's brain.

Academic, athletic strength]

And an amazing brain it is. He doesn't boast about this stuff — "I almost feel like that was a different lifetime," he says — but his parents don't mind expressing their pride.

Tarantino ranked fourth in his class of 3,000 at a Woodbridge, Va., high school (No. 1 in both science and English) and earned a \$100,000 academic scholarship to The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, where he had a double major in biology and physics. He graduated with honors and began pursuing a master's degree in Marine Ecology at age 21, and also went after his Ph.D. He jettisoned that six-year commitment last spring because of the uncertainty of his future.

He was an all-conference, all-region and all-state track star at the prep level, then specialized in the 1,500-meter run (personal-best time: 3:50) at William and Mary, a Division I school.

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All of that probably says a lot about his mental and physical discipline, but there's more.

At 19, he did a 3,000-mile solo hike from Mexico to Canada along the Pacific Crest Trail, a journey he completed despite heavy snowfall, a bout with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and other difficulties.

He has hiked the Appalachian Trail (2,100 miles) and the Continental Divide Trail (3,100 miles), completing the "Triple Crown" of long-distance hiking.

"I can't tell you how many friends asked, 'How could you let him do that? Don't you worry that he might get hurt?'" recalls his mom, Arleen Tarantino, who taught English literature at Northern Virginia Community College and now teaches composition at Monterey Peninsula College.

"And, yes, we worried, but we also supported him. Now, looking back, I'm so happy we let him do that, because I feel like the things he experienced on that hike have a lot to do with the strength he's showing right now. I think letting kids do some of the things they want to do, instead of clinging, is what helps them become adults."

Assuming the worst|

His life changed without warning and without symptoms. Tarantino was in Monterey over Christmas break in 2006 when he brushed against some poison oak during a run through Jacks Park. A nasty rash spread over his legs and stomach before his mom insisted he visit Doctors On Duty.

A physician there gave him a steroid shot, which caused him to pass out and hit his head on the floor. A precautionary CT scan followed at the emergency room at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

"It took them such a long time to come back to us with the results, and that was when I started wondering if there might be something wrong," Will Tarantino says. "They told me they'd noticed an abnormality, they wanted to do an MRI, and they got me in there just 25 minutes later. That got me worried, because those things are normally booked solid."

Tarantino and his parents waited a full hour for the results, during which his mom began to assume the worst.

"I started to figure out that they probably were debating how they were going to tell us what they had found," she says. "Then, when they showed us the slides of the tumor, it just kept getting bigger."

The news, she says, kept getting worse. Doctors were hopeful at first that Tarantino had a Level 2 tumor — benign and comfortably treatable — but recommended surgery to find out, and scheduled it just 20 days down the road.

"I realized that a lot of my fears about the surgery probably were irrational, but I couldn't shake the fact that somebody was going to be carving into my brain while I was unconscious," he says. "I was mostly worried that I might be a different person when I woke up."

Before and after|

Two days before the surgery, Tarantino went for an 18-mile run through downtown San Francisco and past the Golden Gate Bridge to calm himself. The day before, he wandered through the city with his family. It was a great time, he says.

He woke up from the operation with a splitting headache that incapacitated him for close to three days. And massive swelling of his brain created

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problems that worried his family.

"For a few days, he couldn't really move the left side of his body at all," says his father, Bill, a retired U.S. Army colonel. "He had no awareness on the left side of his body — he really couldn't tell when an object was coming toward him from that side — which is when we started panicking a little bit."

There were also financial scares. Tarantino narrowly missed being uninsured, but heeded the advice of a close friend with Multiple Sclerosis and bought a solid package shortly before his problems were discovered.

That didn't stop his insurance company from waging war over \$10,000-a-month chemotherapy payments, a battle Tarantino eventually won with considerable help from two of his Monterey doctors, Shiffman and Brad Tamler.

Now one of Tarantino's goals, he says, is to establish or assist a charity for seriously ill or injured young adults who get caught between insurance plans after their college coverage expires.

Learning from fears

Tarantino returned to Monterey to begin rehabilitation and oncology treatments, and his surgery-related problems diminished over time, but the family's emotional trauma endured. The tumor turned out to be Level 3: malignant, difficult to treat and virtually certain to return, possibly soon, in an aggressive form.

"I went through a period of 'Why him? Why Will?' for a while," his mother says. "I'd be walking on the beach, looking at people's faces, realizing that every one of them is going to die someday. Everybody is going to lose a loved one. We're all going to suffer at some point, and that really made me feel less

focused on our problems, and more compassionate toward all of us.

"This is, by far, the worst thing that has ever happened to me — it's been a real jolt, and it's been painful," she says. "But I realize that everybody's situation is going to change one day, and it's just a matter of when. I think that realization has made me a more empathetic person."

Will's brother, Eric, 15 months younger, probably has had the most difficult time with the illness, their mother says. He prefers not to discuss it, and might be experiencing some denial as a defense mechanism. But Will's parents have bad times, too.

"That's putting it lightly," his father says. "I think, for me, it's a little bit like a volcano. It builds and builds, and then, one day you just basically lose it. We both have those kinds of days."

If Will Tarantino has days like that, he doesn't show those emotions to his friends and family, and resists any urge to feel bitter about his circumstances. He mostly seems more aggressive about living well during the time he has.

"I don't have a list, really, but I love backpacking and I'd like to do some long-distance trips," says Tarantino, who is learning Spanish in preparation for an Alaska-to-Panama hike. "I'd definitely love to do some traveling abroad and see more of the world. And I'm more willing nowadays to skip out on work and go skiing or something. I play by my own rules a little bit more than I used to."

Tarantino, currently doing graduate-level work at UC-Davis, will go through additional cycles of chemotherapy and radiation treatments until June. Then he plans to complete his master's studies at William and Mary. He'll celebrate his 25th birthday on July 6.

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