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A Savage celebration, an album and the 'gifts of cancer'

By Christine Schuster cschuster@swpub.com Aug 26, 2018



Andy Nelson and his longtime friend and fellow musician Mac Cherry at Andy's album release and cancer victory celebration on July 29.

Photo by Autumn Lee Photography

Around 300 people from around the country gathered at the Ames Center on July 29 for Savage resident Andy Nelson's album release party.

It was also his cancer victory party.

Listen to "Meaning to Tell You"

To purchase the album and learn more visit:
www.andynelsonmusic.com

In October 2015, Andy put his mind to recording and releasing an album. One year later, he was diagnosed with stage-four colon cancer. Today, he is cancer free and his debut album, "Meaning to Tell You," is complete.

The unexpected

Heartburn-like symptoms sent Andy to the doctor in October 2016. Andy's wife, Michael, remembers the doctor sitting down and telling her that it looks like stage-four cancer and the care plan might come down to just making Andy comfortable.

"I didn't think they were going to try and fight it," Michael said. "I held that inside so that his body wouldn't go home and think it's time to shut down."

Three weeks later, Andy headed to Mayo Clinic for an official diagnosis — stage-four metastatic colon cancer. At just 48-years-old, with no family history of cancer, it was a complete shock. Doctors at Mayo told him that he falls into the largest part of the pie chart that they call bad luck.

That day, as a treatment plan was put into place, Michael told Andy for the first time how dire the news was that she received three weeks previous at a clinic in Savage.

"She'd be waiting for weeks for something to give us hope," Andy said.

The cancer covered over a foot of Andy's colon, both sides of his liver and 50 lymph nodes. Initially, he did not qualify for life-saving surgeries.

Exactly one year before his diagnosis, Andy was in Chicago at a music conference when he said he prayed and asked God to help him make an album in the next year. He had spent the months before his diagnosis arranging and recording tracks

for the album, not knowing what was around the corner.

"I just knew that, even if it was during my last chemo, I'm going to get this thing out there," he said.

The dance

For the Nelson family, thinking of life with cancer as a dance — rather than a fight — has brought positive energy to the challenges they've faced. In countless doctor's visits, they never asked about a prognosis or how many months might be left for Andy if treatments were unsuccessful.

Andy and Michael have three kids, Sophia, 13, Alex, 17, and Ella, 17.

"We got some advice in a few different ways that when something really hard is happening, you don't focus on where you have to get, you focus on what you have to do in the next hour," Michael said.

After rounds of chemotherapy, Andy received good news — he qualified for surgery. Months later, on June 26, 2017, Andy rang a bell on the oncology floor of Mayo Clinic, announcing that he had completed chemotherapy. He was cancer free.

Michael and the kids had little glass bells made with "to dancing" inscribed on the side.

In May 2018, when Andy returned for routine scans, a seven millimeter spot was discovered on his liver. The oncology department almost began scheduling chemotherapy to begin again right away but Andy's liver surgeon suggested waiting and re-scanning in July.

That evening, the waitress at Outback Steakhouse asked the Nelsons if they were celebrating anything. Michael responded

they were celebrating only seven millimeters of cancer.

"If we can just go there, we give everyone else permission to do that too," Andy said. The waitress, who had recently lost her sister to cancer, joined them at the table that night. Andy began keeping a list on Google Drive of every person who had showed their family kindness or shared their own struggle. He said he continues to pray on the list regularly.

"One of the things you find out is how connected we all are," he said.

Just days before the album release celebration, Andy received another scan at Mayo. The spot had disappeared entirely. He said music has something to do with it.

Meaning To Tell You

Andy's nine-track album, "Meaning To Tell You," explores a variety of rhythm and blues sounds.

"The music gets to teach cancer a few dance steps of its own, take the lead, and let some goodness prevail," the liner notes of the album read. "Because no matter what happens next, this music happened."

Andy's love of music began when his parents gave him a snare drum when he was 8-years-old. He remembers feeling the awe and wonder music evokes when he asked his dad — a highly skilled drummer — to show him how to play it.

At 10-years-old, he began playing trumpet. In seventh grade, Andy was the last chair trumpet player and started to think music wasn't for him. His band director, Randy Blaser, encouraged him to stick with it. By the time he graduated high school, Andy was the lead trumpeter and a concert soloist.

"As artists, I feel like we can all relate to the idea of sometimes I have to create something," he said about continuing to play music throughout his career in IT and leadership.

"I'm so, so happy to say today, at this point in my life, that I've kept just enough music going to feed my soul and feed that part of my life that needs to be fed," he said.

The track titled "Ripples in the Pond" features Mac Cherry and Celine Fitzmaurice — friends who performed the song at Andy and Michael's wedding 22 years ago. Andy wrote the song for Michael back then, but through their cancer journey, it's gained new meaning. Before the diagnosis, Andy invited Cherry and Fitzmaurice to record the track for the album in his home recording studio.

Fitzmaurice, who lives in Portland, Oregon, said that Andy's invitation was an honor and an opportunity for them to reconnect after many years. When she arrived in Savage, she said she immediately noticed that music had grown leaps and bounds in Andy's life.

"This song, Ripples in the Pond, is a song about each of them sort of sending their best selves out into the world and sending out ripples in the pond," Fitzmaurice said. "Their entire lives, the two of them have been constantly generating these ripples through who they are and the work they do in the world."

A dixieland influence can be heard on Andy's arrangement of his father's favorite song, "Louisiana." The jazz sounds that Andy fell in love with in college are mixed throughout the album, with a hat tipped to one of his favorite solo artists, Aretha Franklin, on "Treat Me Right."

The track titled "Live Big" was originally written by Cherry. Andy

worked on rearranging the song with him and Cherry gave him co-writing credits for the arrangement on the album.

"It spoke to me so much because it is really about how time can be short," he said. "You really don't know how much time you have left. I find that prophetic."

The gifts of cancer

Reconnecting with friends and finding a push to finish his album are just a few of what Andy calls the gifts the cancer.

Andy and Michael initially hesitated to throw an open-invitation album release party in light of medical expenses. They decided it was the right way to celebrate when Michael said it occurred to her that she could be planning a funeral instead.

"While they're alive, have people remember stories, have people hug you, have people celebrate with you," Michael said.

Now, the album is out and the CD is available for purchase as well as a digital download version.

Through everything, Michael and Andy said they believe it all played out the way it was meant to — no matter what the future holds.

"It feels amazing and so much sweeter thanks to the cancer," Andy said.