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Bend man navigates a detour in life

BY DAVID JASPER • The Bulletin

Terry Healey, of Bend, will be among the fortunate celebrating National Cancer Survivors Day this Sunday. He was just 20 when he received a cancer diagnosis that resulted in major facial disfigurement at 21, followed by some 30 reconstructive surgeries — a detour in life he could not have anticipated. Today, Healey, 56, is a successful tech sales and marketing strategy consultant. He's also the author of "At Face Value: My Triumph Over a Disfiguring Cancer" and a motivational speaker who strives to help others rebuild their confidence after facing adversity.

In high school, Healey was a handsome and popular young man, a basketball player and track and cross-country runner who was chosen homecoming prince.

"I talk a lot about living life on easy street, getting good grades, being an athlete, being a homecoming prince, and then suddenly, everything changed," he said.

The moment his life began to change came at the University of California-Berkeley, when he arrived at the first bump in the road — or rather, a bump in his nose. Friends began telling him his nostril appeared to be flared.

"The fact that it was pushing my right nostril out, and flaring my nostril, that was kind of the signal from other people — I didn't notice it myself — but from other people saying, 'Hey, is everything all right? Your nostril's flaring out,'" Healey said.

He detected a bump, and when it didn't go away on its own, Healey visited a doctor, who assured him it was probably a pimple. But when the "pimple" didn't go away after three weeks, his doctor suggested a biopsy. Most of the tumor was removed during the biopsy, after which it took five weeks to get a diagnosis.

"I was shaking in my boots, wondering what the heck's going on," he said. "Biopsies take just a matter of days, normally."

Healey learned he had a malignant maxillary tumor, a fibrosarcoma, a type of cancer that can form in bones, muscle and connective tissue.

"They're really rare," Healey said. "They're only about half of 1% of cancers. ... They often form in bones, and because of that, they progress. They're very aggressive. So people

don't know they have it, and they're wreaking havoc underneath the surface. ... Where it typically forms is arms, legs, hips, and it almost never occurs in the head or neck."

And when sarcomas are found in the limbs, the solution is often to amputate, Healey said.

"My doctor, once I got to know him. He said there is one way we could treat this, and the best way, which would be to cut your head off. Then we'd know we'd get it, but we can't do that, and so we'll do the next best thing."

DISFIGURING SURGERY

He underwent an initial surgery to remove any remaining cancerous cells, which required only sutures.

Six months later, the cancer recurred aggressively, and Healey's cheek began to tingle. His doctor prescribed another surgery.

"My doctor warned that I might lose part of my nose, but his main concern was saving my life," Healey has written about his experience. "I suppose I was too young to contemplate dying, but the notion of disfigurement was devastating. I awoke from surgery to find that he had removed not only half my nose but also half of my upper lip, muscle and bone from my right cheek, the shelf of my eye, six teeth, and part of my hard palate."

"My doctor told me that they'd get me back to who I was before," Healey said. "Whether that was bad information or the wrong way to handle a patient, I think the fact that I had hope kept me in the game. ... I was ignorant, right? I was young, I was ignorant, and I was invincible, so I thought, 'Everything's going to be fine. They'll get me

right back to where I was."

They did not. He had his first few reconstructive procedures at University of California-San Francisco.

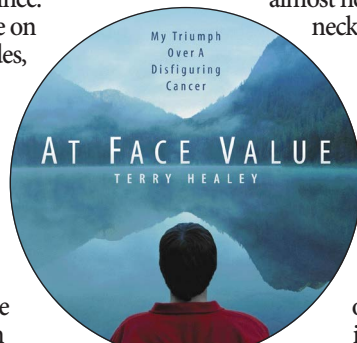
"My doctor said, 'The most problematic part of this patient is his nose,'" Healey said. "That's where he noticed the disfigurement. The problem was, I'd lost the whole foundation behind my nose."

Despite the surgical efforts to fix his nose, Healey's lip began to pull up, his eye drooped and his nose pulled to the right.

"All this additional disfigurement was happening right underneath our eyes," Healey said.

In hindsight, a larger game plan among specialists would have helped.

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Terry Healey's memoir, "At Face Value," was first self-published in 2001 and picked up by a publisher in 2006.

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