

THE POWER OF STORY-WRITING THE BEST LAST CHAPTER

MY NAME IS DEE. THIS IS THE STORY OF THE LAST CHAPTER OF THE LIFE OF MY HUSBAND

Rod

In 1991 after many years of being a single parent to two wonderful boys, as an invited guest to a gathering, I knocked on the door of Professor Dr. Rod Conklin's condo. My knock on the door changed my life forever. Six weeks later we were buying a condo together and selling mine. Twenty years my senior, Rod stayed young at heart. Rod, being the founder of one of the most successful private schools in the country, was around youngsters who kept him sharp and on his toes all the time. I tell this story of him because when Rod passed, he truly was the healthiest

82-year-old around – nothing wrong with him, no medication, no high blood pressure, no diabetes – except he had cancer.

Listen – KNOW WHO THE PATIENT IS – learn about their life, hopes, fears. Who are they, where have they been, what are they most proud of. What would you like your caregivers to know about you?

Except one. The Cancer, Gleason 10s, had escaped on one edge of his prostate.

Prostate-specific antigens (PSAs) every three months for four and half years – each time his score went up incrementally. Then one day it skyrocketed. Rod had hormone therapy for 18 months and suffered from severe back pain which just couldn't be diagnosed. We hadn't heard from BC Cancer as to next steps so out of frustration we went to Kelowna to try and meet with someone! As it turned out, the cancer had spread so badly it had eaten his tubes to his bladder, and urine had backed up into his kidneys. Two nephrostomy tubes later and five days of recovery, we were sent home to enjoy what ever time we had left, but still unsure of the actual severity of his condition. On the evening before the video conference with BC Cancer, Rod fell three times and I could no longer care for him at home.

Three visits to Emergency, telling our story to three different people caused me to "lose it". We felt we had no advocate. There was too long of a wait for a video conference with a BC Cancer oncologist.



When Rod was 75 years old, he was told he had prostate cancer by his urologist who Rod built a trusting relationship with. Two weeks later Rod had surgery and bounced back with barely any repercussions.

Rod was pain free. He had energy to visit with friends and family as we choreographed the best end of life anyone could ask for.

We asked about Medical Assistance in Dying (M.A.i.D.). We were told there was a ten day waiting period. Rod did not have that kind of time and he was adamant that he wanted to control his parting. With grace and sheer professionalism his medical team were able to speed up the process, so a date and time were scheduled within four days. Palliative care should be based on the needs of the patient; not on the patient's prognosis.

We got to know everyone on the unit. They each had that extra gift of knowing what to do and what to say. My needs were as important to them as were Rod's. If this was a hotel, it would have been given a 5-star for the service it provided!

On the morning of his parting Rod was so accepting of his fate. I always believed he would go out kicking and screaming but no, there was such a peace surrounding him. With the country song *Forever Young* – Country Road compilation playing in the background, his medical team allowed him to go peacefully with his family at his side.

I called the clinic and cried asking for help. Once I did that, action happened. The locum phoned, home care called and a visit to the palliative unit.

Introducing palliative earlier would have been helpful allowing us to prepare; to respond to questions about next steps; to write the last chapter of Rod's story.

The video conference finally occurred and the oncologist said we can do this and that for you, but I said "STOP, here is where Rod is today". With shock in her eyes, the oncologist said – "Oh, you have two weeks at most".

Now the palliative care team came into action! For the very first time throughout this entire process I felt like someone took all the pressure off my shoulders. Rod was comfortably settled into a palliative room at the hospital. Pain medications were administered and for the first time in weeks,

Rod had a choice to make. With the support of his family and a collaborative, compassionate team a very difficult and personal decision was made.

Every person's story matters. Loved ones need to be listened to and wishes need to be respected.