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The Bloodline with Blood Cancer United Podcast

A podcast for patients and caregivers

Episode: 'Finding Each Other Along the Way: A Cancer Love Story'

Description:

Two college students. Two lymphoma diagnoses. One unexpected love story.

In this episode, we speak with Kim and Josh Woda, who were both diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma while attending college. They share how they navigated school during treatment, coped with relapse and stem cell transplant, found support in the cancer community, and unexpectedly found each other. Their story is a powerful reminder that connection, understanding, and hope can appear when you least expect it.

Transcript:

Elissa: Welcome to *The Bloodline* with Blood Cancer United. I'm Elissa.

Lizette: And I'm Lizette. Thank you so much for joining us on this episode.

Elissa: Today, we are speaking to Josh and Kim Woda, a husband and wife who were both diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma while attending Binghamton University in New York. Kim was diagnosed with Stage IV Hodgkin lymphoma in 2012 during her junior year of college. After many treatments over the course of several years, she had an allogeneic stem cell transplant in June of 2016 and has been in remission ever since. She now works as a special education teacher in New York City.

Josh was diagnosed with Stage II Hodgkin lymphoma in 2013, and he too has been in remission since his autologous transplant in January of 2022. He now works as a hydrologist for United States Geological Survey. While they met briefly in college and remained distant friends, it wasn't until Josh's relapse in 2021 that they reconnected and eventually got married. Welcome, Josh & Kim.

Kim Woda: Hi. Thank you for having us.

Josh Woda: How's it going?

Elissa: Thank you for being here. We're very happy to have you. So, let's start with your diagnoses. Could you each share how you ended up being diagnosed?

Kim: Sure. I was up away at school. It was the fall semester of junior year, and I had just been experiencing symptoms that I had thought it was like allergy-induced asthma. I had a persistent cough that wasn't going away. I was really itchy, which I later learned was a common symptom of Hodgkin's. Definitely was experiencing night sweats; and then, by the time I finally did get diagnosed, I had a lump by my collar bone, on the side of my neck that at the time of diagnosis, had grown to like the size of a lemon.

Josh: I would say somewhat similar for me. I think I had been experiencing night sweats and a lot of itching over the course of a few months, which kind of all

culminated in me also finding a lump on my neck. I guess the collar bone is the hot spot for us. But, then, everything that followed afterwards washow I was diagnosed.

Elissa: So, what treatments did each of you have?

Kim: I started with the standard classic treatment for Hodgkin's, which was six rounds of chemo, ABVD. So, I had done that. Made very good progress with it. Almost a complete response, but, unfortunately, I'd had this stubborn bit of disease that remained in my chest. So then, they call that refractory lymphoma or disease; and so, then that meant I had to prepare for an autologous stem cell transplant.

So, I had done some non-chemotherapies. I had done three rounds of in-patient high-dose chemo, a protocol called ICE, and all of that to prepare me for the auto transplant, which was January of 2014. And then I was in remission just doing maintenance therapy, trying to keep things at bay until the following September. It was right when I had returned back to Binghamton to try to like resume normal life again. Literally, within that first week, I was in the library doing homework, and I felt the lump in the same spot in my neck again. It was another chemo regimen. I think GVD. I had done a clinical trial with immunotherapy. I had done more rounds of those non-chemotherapies that I had previously done.

And that was until the spring of 2016 where we reached a point where those therapies had become as effective as they were going to be. And one of my doctors was

essentially like, "We're delaying the inevitable here. It's time for the allogeneic stem cell transplant." So, then yeah, it was July of 2016 that I had that. My mom was actually my donor, so it was a haploidentical, meaning half-matched stem cell transplant.

Elissa: Wow, that's interesting that your mother was your donor. We don't often see that with a parent being able to donate the stem cells.

Kim: Yeah, I mean I guess like add it to the list of things that make me unique here. My genetics heritage, Eastern European, there were not perfect matches for me in the registry. So, yeah, it was my doctor. He was the one, being that there was no perfect match in the donor registry, he was the one that suggested doing the haplo.

Elissa: Okay. And I do want to point out for listeners who may not know the difference between the autologous transplant and the allogeneic transplant. Now, the autologous transplant was using your own cells and then doing high-dose chemotherapy. And then the allogeneic transplant was getting the donor cells in.

Kim: Also with high-dose chemo.

Elissa: Yes. And then, Josh, what were your treatments?

Josh: Yeah, I think comparatively to Kim, maybe a little less complicated. But I started with the standard ABVD when I was first diagnosed. I did like eight cycles, and that put

me into remission at that time. But then, ultimately, about seven, eight years later, I did relapse. And at that point I think I did a cocktail of, I forget exactly what the combo was, but they included an immunotherapy drug that, I think I've been hearing is becoming more and more popular for Hodgkin's that put me back into remission before I did the autotransplant, again, which was my own cells which is a little bit easier tolerated for sure. And just spent my time and did that and have been in remission since.

Elissa: That has to be so hard relapsing after seven, eight years. I would think it would feel like getting the rug ripped out from right under you.

Josh: Yeah, definitely against the odds. I think, everyone was surprised. I think they always say when you get to around the five-year mark, it's very, very unlikely. So, it was definitely a little shocking. I had pretty much the same exact symptoms that I had before; and then I found a lump in the same exact spot that I did the first time. So, I had a pretty bad feeling at that point, but, you know, still here, so.

Lizette: So, both of you were in college, my alma mater, Binghamton, go Binghamton, when you were diagnosed. So, how did you navigate school while going through treatment?

Kim: Yeah, I mean between the two of us, very differently. Everything you just said, Lizette, is very true. So, it was definitely that fear of the unknown. You know, hearing

chemo, thinking about all the things you know about people, before you had gone through chemo and all the side effects that entailed. So, just with not knowing what to expect and the fear of the unknown, I actually withdrew.

So, my diagnosis officially happened over Winter Break, between like 2012 into 2013. So, I actually did not return for that spring 2013 semester and then, luckily, everybody at Binghamton was super supportive and helpful; and they offer online classes over the summer. So, then I took a bunch of classes over the summer online while I was home to try to stay on track.

And then, I was planning to return for the fall of 2013, which would have been my senior year; and that was, unfortunately, when I found out that, I still had the refractory disease. So, again, I had to withdraw; and then that winter is when I had the first transplant, so I never planned to be back for that final spring semester.

So then again, another summer of online summer classes; and then it was that, technically like extra semester that I returned right when I relapsed. But I was like, "I'm not withdrawing from school again. I'm so close to graduating." This is the final semester, so it was rough, it was hard. It was a pretty isolating time too because all of my friends of my year, had just graduated that May. So, now I was, back there without all of them, but I was determined to finish. I did not want to transfer home. I wanted that Binghamton diploma.

So, honestly, it was a lot of time shuffling back and forth on buses. My mom would come back and forth with me a lot. So, I would essentially come home for treatments. Thankfully, the chemo that I was doing in those months, I tolerated it pretty well. I don't think I experienced any major side effects. So, yeah, I mean shuffling back and forth but just staying motivated and staying determined, knowing how close I was to the finish line of college.

Lizette: Sure.

Elissa: And Josh, you had a different experience?

Josh: I think for me the idea of withdrawing was a scarier prospect than anything else. I wanted to have a sense of normalcy while I was going through things. And I felt like staying in school was going to probably be the best for my mental well-being at the time, which I think was the right call for me.

But, it was definitely a challenge. I remember, I would get my chemo, typically on a Friday; and then I'd have Saturday/Sunday torecover a little bit before I would go back, either Monday or Tuesday.

And, I think I got a little lucky, if you can say that. I got a little lucky that my treatments started at the beginning of the semester, so, my, chemo, as I think, everyone knows, it gets worse over time. The symptoms kind of build up; but luckily in the beginning, I was feeling a little bit better. And then by the time that, I had been

through my eighth cycle, it was pretty close to winter break. So, I had, a bit of extra time at home to kind of recover after that period.

But, the professors were really accommodating. I remember I took a lighter workload. I think I took one less class and switched to some classes that were going to be a little bit easier. I think I dropped out of Orgo (organic chemistry class) immediately, that I was taking at the time because I was like, "There's no way I'm going to be able to do this with everything going on." But, yeah, just took a little bit of a lighter semester and the professors were incredible. They were all really understanding with everything going on. So, I think I had some accommodations for some testing and especially the finals when I wasn't feeling as well. For me staying in school and having that normalcy and being around friends, I think, was really helpful for me.

Elissa: That's good.

Lizette: Yeah. And I think everybody goes through treatment differently. You're saying that at a certain point after treatment you'd feel better or you know your body to know when you were going to feel worse after that round or treatment. So, you kind of get to know, for your body, when you have more ability to, go to class and do all of that studying. It's very different.

And Josh and Kim, both of you, there's no right or wrong way to go through your cancer treatments.

So, what was it like for you emotionally going through treatment? I know that you spoke about, physically, the emotional piece. And I think, Kim, you mentioned it before. You're 20 years old. You're not thinking that cancer is going to be something that you have to deal with at that time.

Kim: Yeah, totally. I mean, one day I'm in the prime of my life, thriving at school, having the best time. Feeling young, invincible , all that stuff. And then, the next minute I'm going for a CAT scan and having a biopsy and being, told options about egg freezing and at 20 to think ahead and think down the road for all that stuff. So given all of the treatment that I mentioned earlier, I would definitely say, overall, it was an emotional rollercoaster.

There were a lot of highs and a lot of lows through the journey, especially for me with the constant refractory or relapsed disease. There were a lot of punches to the gut there, a lot of PET scans that I was hoping would finally be the news that I wanted that, it wasn't. But I think, in that, there were a lot of positives too. I mean, I think the family and friends and the support network that rallied around me reminded me of like the good in life and the good in the world.

I, you know, hindsight is 20/20, so I withdrew from school; but that first semester, if I could do it over again, I would have stayed in school because I tolerated the chemo, that ABVD really well, like generally, until the last, I want to say, two treatments. Felt

totally fine physically and continued to live my life and try to find senses of normalcy wherever I could.

I mean I definitely don't want to sugarcoat anything. You know, there were a lot of emotions, and there were a lot of feelings there; and there were a lot of some really hard days, but I think an important point to point out, is taking the good when you can and, really capitalizing on those days you feel well to do things and just try to live your life and try to do the things you want to do and normally would do.

Lizette: Yeah.

Elissa: What about you, Josh?

Josh: Yeah, so, it's kind of funny when I think back, I always find, when I was going through treatments a little bit harder to remember than actually the remissions because, I've spent, almost the bulk of my adult life now in remissions. And the actual cancer treatments themselves were a relatively quick portion of it.

At the times of getting the diagnosis, obviously, it was really jarring. But I think a part of me was also relieved to finally have some answers. You know, when you've been feeling strange for months and months, and you don't know what's going on, your mind goes to all crazy places. And, of course, cancer's never what you want to hear, but at least, I think it was some knowledge of knowing that something was happening.

And I always found that, through the treatments, the really regimented structure of treatments and going in for chemo sessions and, waiting that period, to me it kept me kind of focused. But, I think it was always kind of the after, you know, when you then enter the real world after and you're back into remission, I think that, at least for me, I, especially the first time was what I found to be the hardest, of everything, was all the uncertainty surrounding, what was going to come next and worrying about every little symptom and, just trying to adjust to your life after the fallout of, all the treatments that you went through and all the doctors' visits and everything. And, for me, that's always the piece that I felt challenging.

And I think, especially in college, I remember the semester that I finished treatment. I feel like I was in a period of just almost shock about what had happened. And, it's definitely a challenging, year for me afterwards, I think, just dealing with and coping with everything that had happened. And, I had a second chance to think about remission a lot while I was going through my second treatment. And I feel like I did a lot of things very differently the second time.

Lizette: I think one of the things that you're saying really is true with a lot of patients, especially young adult patients. But patients, in general, have told us that once they stopped that active treatment piece, that's when they were able to kind of sit back and breathe and actually take everything in. That they were on this automatic pilot mode through active treatment; and then finally when they were told, "Okay, you're in

remission," that's when everything hit. And that's when you don't have as many doctors' appointments. That's when you don't have, as much support from the treatment center, right?

Josh: Yeah. And I think not just support from the treatment center. I mean I think, your social support too, at least in my experience. You know, you're done with cancer now. So, the check-in and other people, not for any wrong reason, but might start to peel away a little bit, as well. So, it's, this life where you were very surrounded. I think, whether it's doctors and nurses but also friends and family. It's moving back to regular life. I had found that very difficult.

Lizette: That's a great point.

Kim: Yeah, and I think Josh and I went through, like, diagnosis 1 and diagnosis 2 kind of on opposite paths. The first time, I was very public with my journey. You know, posting on social media. Allowed anybody who wanted to rally around me. At my final ABVD chemo, they needed to move us to a different space because, all the friends that came to support me, we didn't fit in the room in the treatment center. And I mean definitely, looking back, I know how helpful that was; and I can't tell you what I was thinking like a decade ago. But when the relapse came, that one I wanted to, almost, battle in silence. I did not want to go through that whole thing and involving people again. I think I was just tired of being the cancer patient of the group. I didn't want people's pity. I didn't

want people worrying about me; and so, I didn't tell anybody. And I didn't text my friends until I was already checked into the hospital.

And looking back now, that was crazy of me. I kept all, the pretesting and all the plans, to myself for so long. And then, all my closest friends and I do have, a nice solid group of best friends. They were like, "What?" And, of course, they then rallied around me once I let them. But even where I was working at the time and I was about to start, a special teacher program. Did not, end those things literally until right before I checked into the hospital for the second transplant.

Josh, I'll let you speak to your own journey. I feel like you did the opposite. It was more lowkey the first time, and then the second time is when you let people in and let them help you.

Josh: Yeah. Kim's totally right with that. I think when I was sick the first time in college, I really didn't know how to handle what I was going to go through. And I don't think I really necessarily knew myself well enough for what was probably going to be the most helpful.

So, I chose to just be more private about a lot of things. I don't remember talking to so many friends about the ins and outs of the details of what I was going through. You know, I didn't have people, with me at the hospital, you know, necessarily coming to

treatments. And then I think afterwards, I remember just kind of going into myself a lot, which, in hindsight was really not helpful for me.

Whereas, when I had a so-to-speak second chance to do it all again, I think I recognized that, the support of the people around me was going to be really, really important. So, I told everyone in my life what was going on. And, I'm very fortunate to have a really good group of friends; and, I had, friends that were coming to treatment sessions with me. And I was, very much more open with, talking to everyone about it.

And then, I think the final piece was that I just really felt like I needed to talk to people that kind of understood what it was that I was going to be going through, whether it was, the different kinds of cancer or the same kind of cancer. And, think reaching out to Kim was one of the first things that I did, in response to that. But I also joined some support groups, as well, and, throughout the experience and even into the remission, I just kept talking with, people that were going through something similar.

And for me, you know, really just the combo of that alongside, just having, my friends and family around was I guess, I don't want to say easier, but it took the burden, I think, off of having to deal with everything emotionally in a way that I didn't experience the first time and, just made things so much easier the second go-around.

Elissa: Yeah, and besides friends and family, were there any other support resources, like national or local, that you connected with during that time?

Josh: Yeah, I worked with CancerCare®. I think they're based out of New York City. And they have free support groups, especially for young adults, which I wasreally interested in. I really wanted to join young adult support groups. And so, they had that, and they still do have that as far as I know, which I think was really helpful to connect with people, around my own age with everything that was going on.

Elissa: Yeah, what about you, Kim?

Kim: As Josh was answering, I was like, oh, man, did I do anything? I don't think so. I know I went to an ice cream crawl with another girl around my age that I had met at the treatment center. A group of us met up in the city and bounced around to a few ice cream spots.

Lizette: I like that.

Kim: It was fun.

Elissa: That's fun, and that's right up our alley. We love ice cream. So, I know you two were going to college, a little bit at the same time. I'd love to know how you met. Did you meet because of cancer or in another circumstance?

Kim: I mean short answer, yes. So, I think Josh was diagnosed as I was wrapping up, my first treatment or right after I'd had the first transplant. And so, we were both involved in Greek life, and it was one of my friends in my sorority was friends with

someone in Josh's fraternity. And I guess somehow it came up, the token Hodgkin's people, and so like they were talking, and I think, you know, philanthropy is big in Greek life, and so they had decided to co-plan an event in honor of each of us.

It was a dodgeball tournament, affectionately titled, "Dodgkin's Lymphoma". They asked us each to write something up for the event. And we had been put in touch, I think, after Josh was diagnosed when someone at school made the connection and was like, "Oh, there's this girl you should talk to." I think we definitely texted a little bit before the event. I spoke to Josh about treatment and your symptoms and where you were being treated, how you got diagnosed, all that.

And then, we did get introduced at that event. I mean we look back at that photo now, and, like, we laugh at, look how this turned out because we just look like two awkward young 20-somethings in that picture, holding a banner, with a quote of what we said. And neither of us likes what we wrote for it. So, it's funny looking back.

But, yeah, so we met then, but we were each in other relationships. And I think too young and too naïve to appreciate having that connection. So, we didn't really stay in touch. We both were involved in something called "Colleges Against Cancer," and that was the group that organized the *Relay for Life* on campus. So, we were both involved in that, so I think we'd see each other at those meetings. But other than that, we just have been friends on social media but didn't really keep in touch.

I don't know, Josh, did I miss anything?

Josh: No, you nailed it.

Lizette: So, how did you end up together?

Josh: As Kim mentioned, we had stayed in touch on social media; and I think, in line with what Kim had mentioned before, I think she was always good at actively posting, her different transplant anniversaries that would come up and, would mention things about cancer all the time. And I knew her story; and I knew that she had gone through stem cell transplant. So, when I relapsed, the first thought I had was I need to talk to someone that's been through this and, is going to be able to kind of tell me what might be down the line for me. Kim loves to laugh about this. I had her cell phone number, but I just felt like messaging her on *Facebook* was the right thing to do.

Kim: Not, even *Instagram*, which was definitely the more normal thing to do at the time.

Josh: But, you know, I just, sent her a message, being like, "Do you remember me?"

Kim: No, it was, "Hey, Kim, not sure if you remember me, but we did that event back at Binghamton." As if there was a chance I didn't remember any of that.

Josh: Needless to say, you never know. But, Kim, luckily, answered right away and, we set up a phone call, I think, for like a few days from then. And, I just had a lot of

questions about, what to expect and what was going to be coming up. Kim was like, "Message me any time. I'll happily talk through, anything you're going to have on your mind or what's going to be coming up."

And I just remember, walking away from that conversation just feeling so much comfort that, someone, who understood what I was going to be going through, was there to be, at that time, a resource for me just to ask questions. I didn't feel like I was burdening anyone or being a problem; and that was so helpful to me. I'm not sure if you want me to go farther about what came next, but-

Elissa: Yes, we want to hear it.

Kim: Josh, could you sound a little more excited when you met me? I promise he doesn't always sound like this.

Lizette: Well, he did make the first move, right?

Josh: I don't know what to say to that.

Lizette: Is that technically the first move?

Kim: I don't even mean this story. I mean in general, like, sound happy, Josh.

Elissa: Yes, we need to know how this led to marriage.

Josh: Well, I'll continue then. I guess what started out as just conversations, I think, for us about medical things and medical questions, soon we were just talking about everything. And conversations about, these medical things. We were just talking about life, and I think where things had gone. And-

Kim: Yeah, like we became friends.

Josh: Yes.

Kim: They were normal conversations.

Josh: And I think where it took a turn, for us was when I went in for the stem cell transplant. I think where we had been, just kind of talking here and there about medical advice but also, some other things. You know, we really started talking every day.

It wasn't even necessarily at that point about medical things. I think, we just had a great time talking and getting to know each other.

Kim: Wait, hold on, Josh, I need to add about that part.

So, it was 2022. So, it was right after, I think the Omicron COVID surge?

Josh: Omicron, yeah.

Kim: So, it was still very much COVID protocols in the hospital. When I thought back to like what an awful time that was for me, that included having my mom by my side 24/7; and so, I, at least, had, my comfort there; and there was someone with me at all times.

When Josh went in, the policy was no overnight stays, visitors for three hours a day only. So, like, the reason I feel we started talking every day was, "I know what an awful and isolating time this is. You're stuck in a room staring at like the same four walls, and you feel too awful to really do anything."

So, I was like as long as he is well enough to, be on his phone and keep messaging me, like I'm going to keep messaging him because I just felt so awful, like him being alone in that room for 21 hours of the day.

Go ahead, Josh. You can continue.

Josh: I mean, that's the short of it. I think, to me it was like at that point where I was starting to maybe see another side; and I just was so, I think taken aback that, I don't know, someone that, at that point, you know, we were friends but relatively new friends, like was going to, spend this much time, I think, and that amount of thinking about me was, I guess for me just really powerful.

And I remember Kim came to the hospital I think, on the day of my stem cell transplant; and she brought, balloons and a bottle of wine. The wine, of course, to be

drunk later because I wasn't in any state to be doing that. And she actually gave it to my mom. My mom had to go down and get it because Kim couldn't come up because of, all the policies going on.

Kim: I called the hospital the day before, and I was like, "I want to drop something off for a patient. Can someone come down?" I thought they were going to send a nurse down. I didn't realize they were going to send his mom down. But thankfully, they look exactly alike. So, like the first time she came, I didn't know. And then when she came back, I was like, okay, she's looking for something. Like, got to shoot my shot here and ask if she's Josh's mom. Otherwise, I'm standing here with these balloons for an hour.

Lizette: And this is how you met your mother-in-law.

Kim: It is, yeah.

Josh: Well, the joke of that too is my mom fell in love with Kim first.

Lizette: Aw! that's wonderful. But that's a pretty big point though that we hear a lot of too is that isolation and especially how hard it became during COVID. To have somebody there and also you formed a friendship. It wasn't just over your diagnoses. It was a friendship.

Josh: Yeah.

Kim: Do you want to continue there?

Josh: I'm just agreeing.

Elissa: Yeah, please do.

Kim: You didn't finish the story.

Elissa: Yeah, we need the end of the story.

Josh: The end of the story?

Elissa: Because you're still not together yet in the story.

Kim: Exactly, we're just friends.

Elissa: You're just friends.

Kim: No, I did because I enjoyed his company so much. I called him my pseudo boyfriend to all my friends because we were talking so much, and I was spending so much time, obviously, not physically hanging out with him, but either on the phone with him or texting him. So, yeah, they all knew him as "pseudo boyfriend" first.

Josh: Well, and yeah. I mean so, after a transplant, I'm guessing as, many people listening know that, you're immunocompromised, for a period; and depending on the type of transplant, it's more extreme or less extreme. For me, it was the auto, so it was the less extreme standpoint. But you're still, pretty isolated. When you return home,

you're really hunkering down. You're not going out and doing anything. And especially with it being COVID, I had to be extra careful, with a lot of pieces.

So, I had another, month and a half where I really wasn't doing anything. But, Kim and I at this point, we're talking all the time and having phone calls; and, I think, we made plans to hang out pretty much as soon as I could. Which, I guess that was the second time we were meeting in person, right?

Kim: Yeah, the first time was before your transplant when I almost gave you COVID. That was bad. I didn't know. I woke up sick the next morning. Yeah, that was scary.

Elissa: Ohh, oh no.

Kim: I felt awful, but thankfully-

Elissa: Oh, especially at that time. We just didn't know. And as blood cancer patients, we're certainly more susceptible to really severe disease.

Kim: Yeah, and it was right before his transplant too. So, it was when he was at the hospital for pretransplant testing. So, I had already lived on the Upper East Side at the time, so I think I remember, Josh, you texting me, being like, "Oh, going to be at the Upper East Side. Do you want to meet me after work?" And, I was double-masked. I wouldn't even hug him hello. We walked, I don't know, however many feet apart along the East River; and the next morning I woke up sick. Thankfully, Josh is a much calmer

person than I am, and he was not fazed. He was like, "I'm sure I'm fine." And thankfully he was, but I think I was more scared about almost giving Josh COVID than like having COVID myself.

Elissa: Aw! So, where do we go from there?

Kim: To the Met.

Josh: You want to continue the story, Kim?

Kim: Sure. So, yes, I think in one of our conversations beforehand, Josh had asked, at that point he was already thinking of, okay, like, once this is all behind me, I want to move into the city. He was at home in Westchester with his parents at the time. So, I think one of your questions was, "What are things that people do in the city or, what do you like?" And, I don't know, somehow, we got on the subject of museums; and so, yeah, this was like mid-March. I think you were coming into the city for your mom's birthday; and you guys were all staying in the city. And so, you were like, "Oh, our plan is Saturday; but I'm free Friday. Do you want to go to the Met and then maybe grab dinner?" So, again, living on the Upper East Side, it was very easy for me to walk over to the Met; and it was like that beforehand. Like, what is this? Are we meeting as friends? Like, is this a date? But I think at that first hangout, I really was just convinced that we were friends and we were hanging out.

But then, the part of the story that I love to tell, is while we're on the line, waiting to get the tickets to pay, I look up, and it says, "Friday's date night at the Met." And I broke out into little sweat because I was like, "Oh, my God, I really hope he doesn't see this. It's going to make things awkward, like, if it's all couples here."

Thankfully, I am the more observant of the two of us; so, Josh did not catch it. And so, then I was, calmer after that. And yeah, I don't know, we had a really nice time. We walked around. We checked out some of, the galleries or the points in history we were interested in. And then, yeah, we went for Thai food in the neighborhood, strategically to a place that had a good outdoor setup. And then Josh being the gentlemen that he is, he walked me home. He had been talking about wanting to move to the city, so I was like, "Oh, do you want to see my apartment? My roommate's home. You could meet her." He came up. He hung out with me and my roommate for I don't know, a few hours more; and it was a really nice night. So much so that, I think before you even got back to the hotel, you were texting me to see if I was free the following Friday.

And so, yeah, we went to Central Park. He brought cookies from Levain (Bakery), so that was a win. Then we grabbed dinner. Then we went back to the apartment.

And so, one of the jokes between us at the time had been I had recently gone for a physical, and my blood pressure was high. And so being two years older than Josh, he was already busting my chops for being old. And so that blood pressure didn't help, and so I was, like, "Yeah, I ordered this machine from Amazon. I'm not sure if it's good.

I'm not sure if I'm getting accurate readings." And in the days before, he had said, "Oh, my blood pressure is consistently whatever over whatever. Like, I know the numbers. My blood pressure runs low. I could test the machine for you."

And so, after dinner, when we got back to my apartment to hang out, he was like, "Oh, yeah, did you want me to look at the blood pressure machine?" And it was in my room, so we moved into my room; and he tested it. I'm expecting it to be like this low reading, and his blood pressure was sky high; and the heart rate on it was sky high. And I still wasn't even like thinking anything, and I was like, "Are you nervous?" And I didn't mean, "Are you nervous about me? Am I making you nervous?" I meant, like, because I get nervous at the doctor's office having my blood pressure taken. And so, his cover was blown at that point, and I guess, I don't know, at that point you were kind of just like, screw it, and he went for the kiss. And now we're married.

Elissa: Oh, that is so cute.

Kim: The blood pressure machine is actually sitting right here on the desk I'm sitting at. It's right in front of me.

Elissa: And it all came from, Josh, you reaching out because you needed support from somebody who understood.

Josh: Exactly. So, you know, if you need support, maybe you'll find your wife.

Kim: Yeah, thank you, *Facebook*.

Elissa: There you go. And, it really does say something, though, about how important support is from people who understand, right?

Josh: Yeah.

Elissa: They understand what you're going through. Oftentimes, with kind of few words, you just have to explain what the situation is, and they're like, "Yeah, I get it." Even if they haven't quite been through exactly the same thing, it really is just so important and meaningful to have support like that.

Kim: Absolutely, which, I mean, I think now as grown adults, we both recognize wholeheartedly, which is why we try to, immerse ourselves in this community as much as we can, because I do always say, there's nothing more powerful than like a room of people or even just one person who gets it.

Josh: Yeah, and I think, it's, like when I was younger, I felt you know, asking for help or asking for support, I think, felt like was like a burden to other people. And I didn't want to be a challenge to people that were, either past their experiences or going through their experiences. But I think, at least for Kim and I now, I think we really both feel that, if you've gone through something like that, or any kind of cancer, we want to give back and, being asked for that help and being asked for that support, it's like the least that we can do to, to give that back. And I think, I recognize that the second time that I was

sick that people are more willing and happy to give than I maybe gave them credit for previously.

Lizette: Now, being together for such a long time, is it easier now to communicate about things like side effects, fear of relapse, anything that has to do with your cancer journeys?

Josh: Yeah, this is kind of a funny one. I think, yes, it's easy for us; but I think it's, I always find it very funny with one of us has a side effect. I think 99.9% of the time something that you're worried about or thinking about is not actually, the thing that you're worried about or thinking about.

And so, I think Kim and I will both do this for each other where we'll have something, and the other person will be like, "I think you're being a little crazy, you know?" And, but that doesn't stop us then from having the opposite reaction, where Kim's stressed about something, and I'm telling her she's a little crazy, but then I'm stressed about something and she's telling me a little crazy. So, I think, having each other to kind of check ourselves has been very helpful, at least for me. Kim, I can't, speak for you, but.

Kim: No, I second that; I mean aside from you just being my husband, like I think it's more, you telling me not to worry about something, right, because you've gone through what I've been through is more powerful than just like a random person or

someone who hasn't been through it being, like, "Oh, stop worrying. You're fine." You know what I mean? You can tell me, Josh, because you've lived it.

Unfortunately, it comes with the territory of being a cancer survivor. I think especially for me, having overlooked so many symptoms the first time around because I was young and I was just like, "No, that can't be." I think now everything I'm hyperaware of; and, even with like my parents, I would get a cold after, and I'd cough from that, and they'd, like, go over the edge. And I recognized for parents how scary that probably was. But as a grown adult now, I feel that too. Every time something's not right, it's that, immediate thought of, like, "Uh oh."

Elissa: Yeah. Yeah, that can definitely be kind of scary when you see those similar symptoms come up. So, I'm glad you have each other to be able to lean on for that support.

Kim: To be crazy with.

Elissa: Speaking of being crazy with, so now you've both been in remission for a few years now. Could you tell us about life after cancer?

Kim: Yeah, I mean, overall, life after cancer, it's sweet, it's wonderful. You think about how hard you fought to get to that point. And there were days that you could only dream of it and imagine it.

So, yeah, I mean overall, after the second transplant, I had been in grad school before the transplant. So, returning back to school, finishing grad school, beginning my teaching career. Moving. I grew up in Brooklyn, so when I say "the city," that means Manhattan. So, moving into the city, like starting my career, starting, just my young adult life, traveling, seeing the world, trying all the new restaurants, trying to keep up with and read all the good books. Yeah, life on the other side of things is good; and I think it just makes you more appreciative of everything and, I try really hard not to take for granted, the little mundane thing that at one point I probably wouldn't have batted an eye over and, now just seems so special because I get to do them.

Elissa: Now, Kim, when you sent over your bio to us, you mentioned you had a working title if you had a memoir. Could you share what that would be?

Kim: Sure, yeah. So, it's "Life's Short: Eat Dessert First." To know me is to know that most things in my life revolve around food or somehow come back to food and restaurants and particularly my sweet tooth. So, yeah, I guess we could say that's another lesson learned here that life's short. Have the dessert first.

Elissa: I love it, especially, I feel like in the young adult cancer community, we always say, "Just eat the cake, right?"

Kim: Yeah.

Elissa: It's just eat cake. And so, you celebrate with cake. "Still alive" or whatever you want to write in there and you always celebrate with cake. And it's just eat the cake. So, I feel like certainly on social media, it's like somebody celebrating something. It's like, "You deserve cake." Just go get cake.

Lizette: Or ice cream.

Elissa: Or ice cream

Kim: Yeah, I was going to say, "For you, it would probably be a brownie with ice cream, but cake if you prefer."

Elissa: Very important. So, what about you, Josh? How has life been after cancer?

Josh: Yeah, I agree with Kim, you know, where life can be really sweet and special after; and it's absolutely been that way for me. But I think other people have other experiences; and I think because I experienced cancer twice, I had very different experiences with a large gap in between.

So, I think the first time, when I was in remission for eight years, I found the first year or two after very, very challenging to get acclimated again and dealing with everything I had gone through, like I said before. And, that period was the hardest part for me. So, when I got sick the second time, I thought, so much about, how I could do things differently the second time around. So, I kind of didn't go through that funk again.

And I mentioned a number of the things that I had found were helpful; but I think another one too was I kind of just took a look at my life. And at that point, I was living upstate; and, besides the reasons you know, moving back to the city was important because my doctors were here. My friends and family are also all in New York City. And, for me, it was this time where I made this cognizant decision of, a lot's happened in my life. Life's short. I really could go at any moment. I'd rather be spending the time, around my friends and family, because I think during the period of being sick, I realized how important all of that was to me and, how much it meant to me. My life was being around those people all the time. You know, it also worked out that Kim was in the city, but that was kind of not the major thought at the time.

But I did ultimately, move to the city; and, again, it was important because my doctors were here and of course, you're being seen all the time and, still being seen. I had an appointment today.

But what I found is being around the people that matter most to me has just been, I guess, life-changing; and being able to see my friends regularly, being able to see my family more often has just been so special for me. Just from the social standpoint alone, I think, it's been incredible; and I think, of course, there's days that you worry about things. And, of course, there's scares and, the two weeks before our wedding, I had a scare that I had to get a PET scan for, which was a nightmare.

But, that happens; and that's luckily in the minority, those events. And they suck, and they're awful when they happen, and they come up; and there's days you worry about things, and there's days that you don't. But, at least in my experience with remission is, those days tend to lessen over time. And you get more comfortable with where you are and, your antenna's always going to be raised, for the rest of your life. You're going to worry about feelings. But, in some ways too though you get to know that you're still here. And every day that we're here is really special; and, I don't know, I think sometimes it kind of gives you a little bit of a bonus on how you feel about life too.

Elissa: I love that. And I'm really glad that you brought up too that people can have different experiences because I'm sure there's a lot of listeners listening today that have a chronic cancer or have a cancer that is not curable right now. And they can still listen to what you shared about life and perspective; and so, I really love that.

Now, our final question for both of you today: on our patient podcast home page, we have a quote that says, "After diagnosis comes hope." What would you say to patients and their families to give them hope after a diagnosis of cancer?

Kim: Yeah, I think, my biggest advice is keep hope alive. Obviously, there's scientific components and medical components of the journey; but I think there's also a huge component that's attitude based. Right, and your situation is what you make of it. And I say a hundred percent, take that time to sit there and cry and shut the world out

or look up to the sky and be like, "Why is this happening to me?" But then, put on your big kid pants and kind of just arm yourself for the battle that's in front of you.

I always loved the mantra, "you're braver than you believe and stronger than you think", because I do really think that's true. It's like you don't know how strong you are until being strong is the only option that you're given. So, yeah, I say, keep that hope alive. Always, keep your eyes on the prize, right, and look at the finish line and know that there's life beyond cancer. Even for people who are dealing with a chronic or incurable one, like you are so much more than just your cancer diagnosis, so live your life and get out there and do the things you want to do on the days that you can. And also, give yourself grace and know that it's, totally okay to, like, lay on the coach and veg and watch TV or ask people for help or lean on those around you on the days that you don't feel okay to do those other things.

But, yeah, we know how overwhelming and isolating this process can feel and can be. But again, you are more than your diagnosis; and there is, this great wonderful life on the other side of things or alongside the diagnosis, right, and it's a gift to get to live it.

Josh: So, Kim, as usual, covered a lot of different aspects, of this. And, you know, just to not repeat, I think, something I'll add was, I think there's no sugarcoating it. Cancer sucks. The diagnosis sucks. The treatments suck. The after sucks. All of it sucks. But even with all of that, I think there's still amazing moments in between it all to find real happiness, to spend time with people that you care about to make memories that

between all of the junk are still really special. And I think it's not a time that you need to just block out. I think it's still a time that, you can really have meaningful life that you live, between it all and I know I've had experiences that I still laugh with my friends about during all of that.

So, I think my piece would be, even through it all, there's definitely positive and little rays of sunshine that you can find.

Elissa: Very, very good advice.

Well, thank you so much, Kim and Josh, for joining us today and sharing all about your cancer love story. We loved to hear it. And then we love to hear how you're doing and the challenges that you went through. And I hope, particularly young adults listening, will benefit from that and we, again, really appreciate you being here with us today. Thank you so much.

Kim: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Josh: Happy to be here.

Elissa: And thank you to everyone listening today. *The Bloodline with Blood Cancer United* is one part of our mission to improve the quality of lives of patients and their families.

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