



coping with a complex cancer diagnosis through music

When Christopher Johnson, 34, was diagnosed with testicular cancer in February 2012, he began a journey that would test his limits and inspire his creativity.

For this music teacher and composer from Raritan, cancer was the furthest thing from his mind. He was busy teaching music in the New Brunswick Public School District, directing a jazz band and composing music.

Testicular cancer caught him by surprise, though it is the most common cancer in men ages 20 to 35. Symptoms include a lump or swelling in the testicles and pain in the abdomen or groin. With

early detection and treatment, it has a very high cure rate.

Complex cancer cases like Johnson's are generally treated only at major academic medical centers. But with the expertise of specialists at Somerset Medical Center's Steeplechase Cancer Center, he is now cancer-free.

TEAM EFFORT

When Johnson's symptoms became hard to ignore, his family urged him to go to the Somerset Medical Center emergency room. There, he would learn he had advanced testicular cancer, which had spread to his abdominal lymph nodes and chest.

He was referred to Dhiren Dave, MD, a urologic oncologist who surgically removed a testicle in an outpatient procedure. Because the cancer had spread, chemotherapy came next.

Oncologist Aysha Khalid, MD, treated him with four cycles of chemotherapy over three months, but there was still a chance that cancer cells remained in his chest lymph nodes. So Stephen Einreinhofer, DO, pulmonologist, and thoracic surgeon Jean-Philippe Bocage, MD, worked together to remove these enlarged lymph nodes.

Finally, Dr. Dave performed Johnson's third surgery, which involved removing



◀ Scan this QR code with your smartphone to hear Christopher Johnson discuss his story.



◀ Visit steeplechasecancercenter.com or call 866-843-7222 24/7 for help finding a cancer physician or cancer resources. Learn more about Christopher Johnson's symphony at <http://cwjmusicouse.weebly.com>.

more lymph nodes. In this five-hour procedure, Dr. Dave removed the lymph nodes and tissues surrounding the aorta and vena cava — the main artery and vein in the abdomen — through an incision from the breastbone to just below the belly button.

“It was pretty scary, but I had complete faith in Dr. Dave,” says Johnson. “All my doctors and nurses at Somerset Medical Center were top-notch. It was a tough recovery, but four days after surgery I could walk without help. When my staples were removed a few weeks later, I learned that I was cured.”

“We use a team approach to cancer care, which brings together the expertise of specialists along with highly trained staff to

provide the most advanced care to patients, in a compassionate setting,” says Katrina Losa, RN, MSN, director of The Steeplechase Cancer Center.

COPING THROUGH MUSIC

Johnson decided to cope with his treatment the way he knew best — through music. He began to compose a symphony to chronicle his journey.

The New Day Symphony has three movements: 1: Five O'clock Shadows, 2: The Night is Darkest and 3: Victory at Dawn. The symphony ends with his successful treatment.

“Composing this symphony became my

support group,” says Johnson. “It was my way of dealing with the situation and diffusing my negative feelings.”

Surviving cancer and chemotherapy also motivated him to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a composer and starting a music publishing business. “Look at your bucket list and find something that you’ve been waiting to do that you will absolutely enjoy and will take your mind off what is happening physically. Do whatever you need to help make yourself full again.”

Today Johnson is back to doing what he loves best, teaching and composing music. “I’m grateful to everyone at Somerset Medical Center. I’m so happy to be cancer-free.”