NEVER GIVE UP

Spirited Messenger Champions Prostate Screening

By Michelle Bearden

Richard Gonzmart
Survivor

Photography: Cliff McBride
Richard Gonzmart, a man of deep faith, prayed about finding a well-known face and name for help with his efforts to raise funds for prostate cancer research and to help raise awareness of the disease.

“It’s a topic most men don’t want to talk about,” Gonzmart says. “It makes them squeamish and uncomfortable. I wanted a messenger who had the courage to stand up and speak out.”

Not that the Gonzmart name doesn’t hold clout in the Tampa Bay area.

He’s the fourth-generation president of the Columbia Restaurant Group, a legendary chain that includes Florida’s oldest dining establishment in Ybor City, the much-lauded Ulele in the former Tampa Water Works building and the soon-to-be resurrected Goody Goody diner in Hyde Park Village.

In the public sphere, he’s a gracious host, a successful businessman and a generous philanthropist who puts a high priority on giving back to his native city. On the home front, he’s a devoted husband, father and grandfather.

Still, Gonzmart needed someone who was willing to step forward and share his personal story about prostate cancer. Someone who could help champion the importance of the painless screening to detect the disease. Those who catch it in the early stage have a five-year survival rate of nearly 100 percent; when diagnosed at a late stage, patients suffer more serious consequences.

Other than skin cancer, prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men. One in seven will get it. The American Cancer Society estimates 27,540 men will die from prostate cancer this year. It is the fifth-leading cause of cancer death in the U.S., and African-American men are disproportionately affected.

Then came the message on his cell phone from his urologist after he went in for a routine checkup.

It was Oct. 31, 2013, the day before his annual Richard’s Run for Life. Every dollar raised by the event is donated to the Advanced Prostate Cancer Collaboration at Moffitt Cancer Center and the Adolescent and Young Adult Program for sarcoma research.

“I’ve got good news, Richard. You got prostate cancer, but it’s the nonaggressive kind. And we caught it early,” said Julio Pow-Sang, M.D., chair of the Genitourinary Oncology Department at Moffitt.

Gonzmart’s reaction?

“My prayers were answered,” he says, smiling. “I found my messenger. God does work in mysterious ways.”

Gonzmart, 62, is a man who counts his blessings every day.

“You start with a positive attitude. And in my case, lean on God.”

He met the love of his life, Melanie, at a school dance. He was a 15-year-old sophomore at Jesuit High School, and she was a 13-year-old freshman at Sacred Heart Academy.

Five years later, tossing aside advice from others who said they were way too young, they exchanged wedding vows. Two grown daughters, five grandkids and 42 years later, they still act like they’re on their honeymoon.

Gonzmart had no intentions of letting the disease win. He had way too much to live for, starting with his beloved family. He was in the final stages of opening Ulele and had started the groundwork to bring the famed Goody Goody back to life. An avid runner, he was in training for several major marathons and half-marathons in Boston; Rochester, N.Y.; Chicago; New York City; and St. Augustine. There were charities to support, causes to champion, and international trips on the horizon in search of new wines and products for his restaurants.
As for cancer, it had already hit home, twice. His grandfather died of prostate cancer at age 70, and his father died at 72 of pancreatic cancer. It also took one of his good friends, Tampa football great Freddie Solomon. They are the reason Gonzmart has spent so much time and energy promoting prevention and raising funds for cancer research.

**NOW, IT WAS HIS TURN TO FIGHT THE BATTLE.**

“You start with a positive attitude. And in my case, lean on God,” he says. “Any obstacle he’s put in my path, he helps lead me through it.”

It has worked with his other health issues. Instead of battling the insomnia that limits his sleep to four to five hours, Gonzmart uses those pre-dawn hours to answer emails, catch up on movies or dig into the multiple projects he’s always juggling. He has learned to work with dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, two lifelong conditions he has dealt with since childhood. It starts by speaking openly about them to shed the stigma.

For his severe anxiety, Gonzmart is always accompanied by his German shepherd service dogs, Rex and Rusty. He loves his canine companions so much that he had a statue erected in their honor at his home.

Two days after he got the news, he left on a two-week cruise to Spain, accompanied by Melanie and 30 company employees. When Gonzmart broke the news to his staff, he quickly reassured them he would beat the cancer and become a vocal proponent of routine screenings. If you keep something like this a secret and people find out, he reasoned, “they will have you dead and buried.”

“I wanted them to know, and everyone else, that I was not going to let prostate cancer change the way I live my life,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be a death sentence.”

Because Gonzmart’s cancer was caught early, he was a candidate for high-dose rate brachytherapy (HDR), which is less invasive than other forms of treatment. Dr. Pow-Sang calls it “highly effective while maximizing the preservation of quality of life.”

While the patient is under general anesthesia, about a dozen needles deliver radioactive implants into the prostate gland.

The HDR process included two treatments, two and a half weeks apart. Though it left him quite sore, Gonzmart was able to run four miles a few days after the first treatment. And after the second treatment, he waited four days again and then logged six miles.

He acknowledges that not everyone would attempt such a feat. But this is a man who has survived running with the bulls, twice, in Pamplona. He has completed 150 triathlons and 24 full marathons over the years. So for him, it was important.

“The Lord lets me push the envelope,” he says. “But he’s always watching over me. I really have nothing to fear.” Instinctively, he reaches for the gold St. Jude medal given to him by his father that always hangs on a chain around his neck.

A year later, Gonzmart got the good news that he promised everyone would come. His prostate specific antigen (PSA) numbers — which can be an early-warning sign of prostate cancer — came in the lowest since he was a young man. And he was declared cancer-free. (PSA is a protein produced by prostate cells, and a PSA blood test is done to help diagnose and follow prostate cancer in men.)

Dr. Pow-Sang says Gonzmart’s experience is not out of the ordinary. “We are learning more about the disease process and developing more effective treatments,” he says. “The best weapon to fight cancer is a very educated patient.”
GONZMART HAS KEPT HIS PROMISE ABOUT BEING A MESSENGER.

In June, for the third year, the Gonzmart Family Foundation sponsored Richard’s Father’s Day Family Walk/Jog, with 100 percent of the proceeds going to Moffitt’s Advanced Prostate Cancer Collaboration. Last year’s event donated more than $80,000 to the initiative. That’s in addition to the Richard’s Run for Life fundraiser in November, now in its 14th year.

Dr. Pow-Sang says those funds come at a crucial time, as federal grants for research are becoming less available.

Last spring, when he was named a Community Hero in April by the Tampa Bay Lightning, Gonzmart donated part of his $50,000 award to Moffitt. He has told his story at speaking engagements and community events. He’s a member of the Moffitt Foundation Board of Directors, which oversees fundraising on behalf of and makes contributions to support the cancer center in its mission to contribute to the prevention and cure of cancer.
And he’s using social media to spread the word to an even bigger audience. Facebook is one of his forums to talk about being a cancer survivor and to encourage men to schedule annual screenings.

A recipient of Gonzmart’s guidance attests to his devotion to this cause.

Steve Cleveland of Indian Rocks Beach went to a routine screening. When his PSA numbers came back “off the charts” and a biopsy was ordered, he reached out to Gonzmart through a personal message on Facebook.

“I had only met him casually in public life a few times. But I had been following his posts about prostate cancer,” says Cleveland, a general contractor who grew up in Tampa. “He answered me up right away. He left his number and asked me to call immediately.”

A former Marine, Cleveland had to rely on insurance provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Each of his 14 biopsies came back with a 60 percent or higher rating. He underwent a rigorous robotics surgery that lasted eight hours, followed by 44 radiation treatments over the next six months.

Through it all, Gonzmart was a support system, a prayer partner and an upbeat cheerleader.

“I became part of a fraternity I really didn’t want to join. But once you’re in, there’s a brotherhood there,” Cleveland, 58, says. “Even though he was busy running marathons and a big restaurant company, Richard was there for me. He’s a compassionate guy who made the time to help get me through a difficult period in my life.”

So when Gonzmart asked Cleveland to be one of the speakers at his Father’s Day fundraiser, Cleveland happily complied.

Besides his St. Jude medal, Gonzmart also wears a rubber bracelet around his wrist that proclaims “Never Give Up.” Those three words summarized his robust, adventuresome, accomplished and sometimes complicated life.

A life he will never take for granted.

“The older I get, the more I realize how fast time is flying by,” Gonzmart says. “I want to keep laughing, keep loving and keep giving, for as long as I can. Every day is a gift.”

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Richard Gonzmart with Rex and Rusty