

Humour out of darkness

By Joseph Hall, Toronto Star, April 3rd, 2016

Toronto author, actor and comedian Robert Hawke is marshalling humour in the battle against cancer, after it helped him through his own bout with the disease.

Toronto comedian Robert Hawke helps cancer patients out of the “4 a.m. darkness” with his “Spoonful of Laughter” workshop.

His comedy career was riding a high-speed laugh track a decade ago, having brought him frequent appearances on CBC television and radio shows and a full-time gig with the Second City comedy troupe. “I was freelancing, things were good,” he recalls. “And I was leading what I considered to be a pretty healthy life.” But then cancer sent him off the rails.

Hawke learned he had a thyroid tumour and that the master metabolism gland would have to be removed. The diagnosis and treatment proved psychological blows as much as physical ones. During weeks of fretful recovery, however, he hit upon this “funny idea” — to combat his cancer with comedy. The material he started developing and writing then would build a new calling and career.

“Once I started doing (comedy) work that addressed the cancer experience, I realized there was a real need for it,” says Hawke, now 50. That need found its source in the deep wells of fear, despair and isolation into which cancer patients often fall. Using his comic skills to make cancer patients laugh, he thought, could help haul them out of that “4 a.m.” darkness and allow them to more readily share their experiences and insights about their battles with others in similar straits.

Comedian and cancer survivor Rob Hawke, in blue striped shirt, leads an improv class of cancer patients at Gilda’s Club to encourage group laughter.

Hawke has developed several programs to address different audiences. For cancer patients themselves, his “Spoonful of Laughter” routine is a 40-minute exercise that leans heavily on teaching improv techniques in groups large and small. Another, called “NormVsCancer,” is an irreverent one-man show that OpenLab helped him bring into hospitals and other medical settings.



Rob Hawke; Photo: Chris So, Toronto Star

He also created a program — Adventures in Patient-Centred Care — that teaches second-year University of Toronto medical students how to interact with more humour and humanity in the clinic.

Hawke believes that shared laughter is a key to opening cancer patients up to the camaraderie, comfort and expert advice — the “wisdom in the room” — that can be found in fellow patients. And the reactions of patients involved in one of his recent improv exercises seemed to bear him out.

“I don’t think we get enough opportunities to laugh,” said participant Nadha Hassen, 26, who is battling thyroid cancer. “It’s amazing to ... be in a space with other (patients). I feel like I just took this amazing stretch.”

Hawke also published a how-to book in 2011, called *Kicking Cancer’s Ass: A Light-Hearted Guide to the Fight of Your Life*. It offers cancer patients strategies on dealing with doctors, setting up support groups, making healthier choices and overcoming the bouts of worry and depression the disease can bring.

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