

Shane Varga Diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease

By TJ Jorgensen April 17th, 2009

For five years, I have enjoyed bringing excitement to the softball world through my stories, pictures, videos and taking a simple league team from South Bend and turning it into one of the most popular teams in the sport. I have watched this website grow from one page with 20 visitors a day, to thousands of pages and over 200,000 visitors per month.

I am not excited about the article I am about to write. This week, my friend and teammate Shane Varga of Street Kids Softball, was diagnosed with cancer. Hodgkin's disease, is the more accurate name for this type of cancer, where it attacks the lymphatic system (lymph nodes).

One week ago, Shane and I were both enjoying a vacation day at my home in South Bend. Jason Jeffery and Luke Myers were also at my home as we sat around talking about softball. Prior to Jason and Luke arriving, Varga was lounging on a small sofa I have in my office, and didn't seem to be very comfortable. I didn't think twice about it at the time, but after Jason and Luke arrived and we began talking for awhile, I noticed Shane rubbing his neck in a peculiar manner. He was quiet for several minutes while the three of us continued to talk then he stood up and said he didn't feel well and needed to get going. After I asked him if he was okay, he said fine and left. The three of us never gave it much thought, and I would never have given it much thought about him rubbing his neck had I not known what I do now.

After Shane left my house, he went to see his doctor about what he described as a hard mass type of feeling in his neck. Concerned, the doctor ordered a CT scan and sent Varga home to rest. When he got home, he called me to tell me why he suddenly left, and that he had felt this abnormal mass substance in his neck and he wanted to have it checked out. Now, at this point, I can hear a little hesitation in his voice. I can tell he was a little more than just worried, so I became a little more worried.

"Are you okay," I asked him.

"I'm sure its nothing," he answered. "But you know me, I tend to panic over nothing."

I made him promise to call me when he heard more news or results of the CT scan the doctor ordered.

I need to set the stage a little more for those who do not know the relationship Shane and I have. Shane came to Street Kids in the fall of 2006. He contacted me because for one, he wanted to get swings on a good team in a fall league and wondered if I had a spot, and two, he was attracted to the things we were beginning to do off the field.

"I remember Shane sitting at my house a few years ago saying the main reason he wanted to join SKS was to make a difference with his life off the field," said teammate Joe Richard.

Shane and I began a friendship that off season, talking about some plans both on the field - bringing together his Network Design team and SKS - as well as off the field, building and creating Street Kids Care, the charitable division of the softball team. With both of us being Christians, we formed more of bond than I had with other teammates. We confided in each other about issues that

concerned our lives - how we were feeling, emotions and such. We opened up to each other, sharing our aspirations and our fears. Sure, we both had plenty of friends, but we also knew that we could confide in each other about things that some friends just would not understand, or even poke fun at. This relationship grew over the next couple of years and I made Shane one of my closest confidants in the organization as it began to grow. He stepped up behind the scenes with Street Kids Care, along with his wife Amy, they came up with more ideas and solutions to take Street Kids Care to another level. So because of my relationship with Shane, you can understand why I was bothered when I received a phone call this past Monday afternoon from Shane, telling me simply...

"It appears... that I have cancer."

"Shane Varga, this better be one of your jokes."

"TJ, this would be one of those times that I wish I was joking."

I received that phone call Monday afternoon and just sunk into my chair at work. One of my closest friends and teammates just told me he has cancer. How do you reply to that? What can you say? Outside of my sister having cancer when we were very young, and my mother battling a form of breast cancer, I had never experienced the disease so close to home.

I vowed to do whatever I needed to help him get through this tough time. He didn't seem to be as down as I thought he would after being told you have cancer. But the next day, he was feeling pretty low, saying that the reality of what happened had just set in.

It turns out that in the CT scan, more than just the area on his neck was discovered, in fact a 6" long growth was found behind his sternum, thus immediately making this form of Hodgkin's a stage two cancer, being in more than one place. Shane and I spoke several times between Monday and Thursday, but when we talked for awhile on Monday night he said that an appointment was made with an oncologist for Friday and then another appointment needed to be made to have a biopsy done, to find out just how bad this could be. I told Shane he needed to call them back in the morning (Tuesday) and beg to be seen sooner. He did, and they moved up his consultation to Wednesday with the oncologist. Upon review of the CT results and checking the area on Shane's neck, the doctor ordered surgery the very next day.

On Thursday afternoon, Shane was having surgery to remove the enlarged lymph node from his neck, which turned out to be the size of a golf ball, so that it can go through a pathology process to find out exactly what it is. A bone marrow test was also taken (a very uncomfortable test where, as Shane described it, was like taking a cork screw and drilling all the way to your bone). This was so they can determine what stage his cancer is in.

In order to get a better opinion of the stages of cancer, I did some research online about it and here is what I discovered from Jessica Evert, MD:

Following a positive identification of cancer, doctors will try to establish the stage of the cancer. Cancers are ranked into stages depending on the extent of their growth and spread through the body; stages correspond with severity. Determining the stage of a given cancer helps doctors to make treatment recommendations, to form a likely outcome scenario for what will happen to the patient (prognosis), and to communicate effectively with other doctors.

There are multiple staging scales in use. One of the most common ranks cancers into five

progressively more severe stages: 0, I, II, III, and IV. Stage 0 cancer is cancer that is just beginning, involving just a few cells. Stages I, II, III, and IV represent progressively more advanced cancers, characterized by larger tumor sizes, more tumors, the aggressiveness with which the cancer grows and spreads, and the extent to which the cancer has spread to infect adjacent tissues and body organs.

While Shane was having his enlarged lymph node removed from his neck, the doctors found that there are more enlarged lymph nodes. But this operation was not to clean out the cancerous lymph nodes, but to get the one by the neck so they can do a biopsy on it to determine exactly what is going on.

The also discovered that Varga had an enlarged spleen, and that the growth behind his sternum was about the size of a large fist. This as well as the other enlarged lymph nodes would have to be killed by either radiation or chemotherapy, which is the use of medicines or drugs to treat disease. Many times this treatment is called just "chemo." Surgery and radiation therapy remove, kill, or damage cancer cells in a certain area, but chemo works throughout the whole body. Chemo can kill cancer cells that have metastasized or spread to parts of the body far away from the primary (original) tumor.

This morning (Friday), about the time that hundreds of people are reading this article, Shane will be going through another test called a PET scan. Positron emission tomography (PET), is a type of nuclear medicine imaging. Nuclear medicine is a branch of medical imaging that uses small amounts of radioactive material to diagnose or treat a variety of diseases, including many types of cancers, heart disease and certain other abnormalities within the body. Varga is having this test done to see if the cancer is in other parts of his body, because they already discovered the ones in his neck and chest.

Sometime early next week, Shane and his wife Amy will have the results back from several of the tests that he has gone through, and by this time they will have a more clear perception of exactly what lies ahead for their family. In the meantime, Shane and I continue our talks and as I broke the news to our team that he had cancer, Shane found out that he has a lot of people praying for him and hoping for the best.

Thursday night, Joe Horvath and I went to see Shane at his home in Granger and I think it might have been one of the best feelings he has had this week. Amy told me on the phone before we came over that he was not feeling very "up" but he would like to see us. But after spending a couple of hours with Shane, laughing and talking about other things besides whats going on, it was easy to forget for a few moments what actually *was* going on. For awhile, it was three friends talking about everyday things. There were no tests, no surgeries, no cancer. Just laughs and stories.

When I got home, I called Shane to talk a little more deeply about how he was feeling. I asked him if he wanted me to go through with this story. He told me that he feels that he has a story to tell and I was the one to help him tell this story.

I asked Shane what his biggest fear is.

"I think at this very moment, just waiting," he said softly. "Waiting for the results, the stages, the classification, the success rate. Just to know what I am up against, you know?"

I asked Shane what he thinks about as he tried to sleep this week.

"I think about staying positive. Not just for myself, but for my wife and family. I think I can handle whatever is dealt me, but its the feeling that others have that makes it so hard. When my wife was going through her very painful procedures this past fall and winter, I told God to take it out of her and give it to me. While I don't think that was the case, but it sure is ironic."

So by staying positive, you feel you can keep others positive?

"In a way, yea, but when you think of cancer, you always think of the worst thing. And I hate that people will have to think like that. I don't want my family to go through the pain."

Now that you know what has just happened, can you look back over the past year or so and think about how you felt during some times that prevented you from playing softball?

"Now I can, sure. Looking back, I remember how I could play a few games on Saturday in a tournament and be absolutely exhausted and tired that night and, even more, the next day. It was more than just fatigue or aching muscles, it was like I had no energy at all. And my play showed it. I went from having a MVP season in 2007, to hitting .550 in 2008, before finally shutting it down because of my body hurting all the time."

The scary part of this story is that if it were actually attributed to this, how long did it go unnoticed? Could Shane have had these enlarged lymph nodes for over a year?

"I guess the tests next week will show that."

For now, all of Shane's friends and family can do just what he is doing: waiting. Waiting to see the results, waiting for some answers to what is going on within his body.

One thing we know for sure is that Shane Varga is about to start a new game. And its not the game he has played on the field for so many years, where he competed for state and national titles. This game has so much more at stake. In this game, Shane Varga is fighting for his life. But one thing is for sure... just like on the field, Shane will not have to fight this battle alone.

We love you, Shane and will be right beside you all the way.

To post a comment on the Street Kids message board and show Shane Varga your support, click [here](#).

StreetKidsSoftball.com will cover every step that Shane and his family takes as he battles Hodgkin's

disease, as Shane has given us the blessing to do so. Continue to look for more information as it becomes available on Shane and his new brave fight to defeat cancer. To reach Shane via email, please sent it to me, at TJ@StreetKidsSoftball.com, and I will forward it to his personal account.

Special Section - What is Hodgkin's disease?

Hodgkin's disease is one of a group of cancers called lymphomas. Lymphoma is a general term for cancers that develop in the lymphatic system. Hodgkin's disease, an uncommon lymphoma, accounts for less than 1 percent of all cases of cancer in this country. Other cancers of the lymphatic system are called non-Hodgkin's lymphomas. Non-Hodgkin's lymphomas are the subject of another NCI booklet, What You Need To Know About™ Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

The lymphatic system is part of the body's immune system. It helps the body fight disease and infection. The lymphatic system includes a network of thin lymphatic vessels that branch, like blood vessels, into tissues throughout the body. Lymphatic vessels carry lymph, a colorless, watery fluid that contains infection-fighting cells called lymphocytes. Along this network of vessels are small organs called lymph nodes. Clusters of lymph nodes are found in the underarms, groin, neck, chest, and abdomen. Other parts of the lymphatic system are the spleen, thymus, tonsils, and bone marrow. Lymphatic tissue is also found in other parts of the body, including the stomach, intestines, and skin.

Cancer is a group of many related diseases that begin in cells, the body's basic unit of life. To understand

Hodgkin's disease, it is helpful to know about normal cells and what happens when they become cancerous. The body is made up of many types of cells. Normally, cells grow and divide to produce more cells only when the body needs them. This orderly process helps keep the body healthy. Sometimes cells keep dividing when new cells are not needed, creating a mass of extra tissue. This mass is called a growth or tumor. Tumors can be either benign (not cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

In Hodgkin's disease, cells in the lymphatic system become abnormal. They divide too rapidly and grow

without any order or control. Because lymphatic tissue is present in many parts of the body, Hodgkin's

disease can start almost anywhere. Hodgkin's disease may occur in a single lymph node, a group of lymph nodes, or, sometimes, in other parts of the lymphatic system such as the bone marrow and spleen. This type of cancer tends to spread in a fairly orderly way from one group of lymph nodes to the next group. For example, Hodgkin's disease that arises in the lymph nodes in the neck spreads first to the nodes above the collarbones, and then to the lymph nodes under the arms and within the chest. Eventually, it can spread to almost any other part of the body.