

T and Sympathy



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by JOE RHODES

Mr. T walks through the place as if he owns it, past waiting rooms and treatment areas, down gurney-lined corridors he has come to know all too well. He stops along the way exchanging handshakes and bear hugs, acknowledging

familiar faces, calling them all by name.

If it were anywhere else, some place other than the Cedar Sinai Comprehensive Cancer Center in Beverly Hills, he might not be recognized at all. He's smaller than most people think, 5-10 if you're being generous, and his trademark Mandinka hairstyle, slightly grown in, is hidden under a floppy hat. He isn't wearing gold necklaces or combat boots or a sleeveless muscle shirt.

There is no super-hero swagger in his walk, no trace of the trash-talking butt-kicking fool-pitying comic-book-come-to life Mr. T who pounded his way into pop icon status 20 years ago, first in "Rocky II" and then on "The A-Team." What he looks like, instead -- in his loose-fitting denim shirt and his blue felt slippers -- is a patient.. And, for most of the last six years, a patient is what he has been.

"I wanted you to meet me at the cancer center," he says, leading the way into an open-air plaza, finding a shady spot under a favorite tree, "because a lot of celebrities don't want to talk about what I'm dealing with.

"But I want to face it head on. It's not something I try to avoid. I wear my cancer like I wear my blackness. I wear it with pride."

Since 1995, when he was first diagnosed with T-cell lymphoma, a rare form of cancer that attacks the lymphatic system but often manifests itself as ordinary-looking skin blotches and patches of dry skin, Mr. T has been a regular presence here. This is where he endured biopsies, radiation treatments, chemotherapy and – from February 1997 until October 1998 – daily injections of Interferon. He still comes for injections every three weeks, but he visits more often than that.

“When I first started coming here, I hoped there would be other patients who would talk to me, to tell me what it would be like. Cause only another cancer patient knows what you’re going through. So that’s why I like to look for new patients, to give them hope. I was there. I was weak. I know how they feel. I let them know that I’m Mr. T. And I’m fightin’ cancer, too.”

In the past year, in case you haven’t noticed, Mr. T has come storming back into the public consciousness,. He is everywhere --scowling, shouting and punching his way through television commercials, showing up on talk shows (including NBC’s Late Night with Conan O’Brien, who was so jacked up at the prospect of interviewing a childhood idol that he began running in place, double time, on

top of his desk) and serving as spokesperson for Nick at Nite’s TV Land cable channel (“I put the T in TV Land,” he likes to say.)

He has also become an Internet phenomenon, adored by thousands of 20-something cyber fans, who grew up eating Mr. T cereal, watching A-Team re-runs and Mr. T cartoons. There are hundreds of Mr. T tribute pages, most of them computer-manipulated photos of their hero doing comic book battles with all manner of opponents – Mr. T vs. Britney Spears, Mr. T vs. Bill Gates, Mr. T vs. Saddam Hussein.

“Until I met Mr. T, I never really understood what it means to be larger than life,” says TV Land promotional consultant Barry Greenberg,. “He is beloved. People are fascinated by him. And he’s a guy who will always sign that last autograph, take that last picture. When you see a guy with all this energy, loving the public, exploding in their presence, it’s just absolutely irresistible.

But for a while there, almost five years, he just sort of disappeared. Fools went unpitied. Jibba-jabba went unchallenged. Mr. T was gone. There were rumors, of course. That he’d died. That he had AIDS. That he’d gone back to his home planet. Every once in a while, he’d make a brief appearance. At a memorabilia show. Or a

wrestling match. But something, clearly, wasn't right. Even his mother (now 82), whom he'd showered with gifts and worshipped like a saint, didn't hear from him for nearly two years.

"I just couldn't call her," he says. "I was nervous. I knew God was with me. If I wasn't strong in my faith, I wouldn't be here. I stayed strong. But let me tell you, brother, there were a lot of long nights, nights where the sun never came up. I couldn't sit up, I couldn't lay down, throwing up from the chemotherapy. I'd worry, "Will the cancer spread." But I didn't break. I just knew I had to get through it."

The first symptom, in 1995, was merely a pimple on his ear. At first he thought it was just an allergic rash, or maybe an ingrown hair. But a biopsy revealed the cancer and doctors started a series of tests to see how far the it had spread. They checked his lymph nodes, his bone marrow, his liver. They tested for AIDS. There was a long, sleepless weekend, wondering how it would all turn out.

By the time he heard the results, that the cancer was manageable and he didn't have

AIDS, Mr. T had decided to radically alter his life. Born Lawrence Tero 49 years ago, he'd grown up poor, on the south side of Chicago, one of 10 children, his mother buying food with the money she made "from scrubbing white people's floors."

He has long since turned his growing up into a kind of urban fairy tale, how he worked his way out of the ghetto with his wits and his fists, how he joined the Army, became a bouncer and a bodyguard and turned himself into Mr. T. As proof that he'd conquered the poverty of his youth, he'd pursued material wealth with a fervor. He spent his money lavishly, on gold chains, Rolls Royces, expensive homes, the extravagances of fame. And he also made sure his mother would never have to work again.

But after the cancer diagnosis, Mr. T claims that with his mother financially secure, he slowly, methodically, gave it all away; the mansions, the jewelry, the cars, all of it. He lives alone, in a small house in the San Fernando Valley. When he needs to drive, he rents a mid-sized car.. In 1998, told Entertainment Tonight that after being worth millions in the 1980's he had only \$200 in his banking account. There may have been other motives, among them a decision to declare bankruptcy in the midst of a 1996 lawsuit from former associates who claimed

he owed them money. But mostly, he says, it was an intentional cleansing, a realization that he wanted to focus on other things.

“My money could not save me,” he says, his voice rolling like a preacher’s. “My Rolls Royce couldn’t save me. My gold couldn’t save me. None of it mattered any more. When I went in for the CAT scan, the doctor didn’t care about my gold. So I gave it away.”

Over the next few years, Mr. T says, the cancer would occasionally fade and then flare up again. There was radiation at first and then, in late 1996, chemotherapy and, the year after that, Interferon therapy, a rotating cocktail of remedies that continued into last year. Now, with the cancer in retreat, Mr. T’s treatment is down to the Interferon injections every three weeks, and the daily consumption of other cancer-fighting drugs, at least 8 pills a day.

The worst of it was in 1998, when the blotches – stinging and itching like insect bites – covered his back and legs and the chemotherapy made it nearly impossible to eat. He lost 20 pounds that summer, suffering from the treatment more than from the disease. But now, he says, he is grateful for the pain. The pain was his test and his

ability to get through it was the proof that he would survive.

“Until the chemotherapy, I didn’t really feel like I was dealing with cancer. I’d come in for treatments and see other people on the gurneys, thin, losing their hair. But I didn’t feel sick. I was just going about my business. It’s like something was missing. But then – when chemotherapy made me throw up and everything, I said, “Now it’s real. Now I know what these people are going through.

Although he tires more easily than he once did, Mr. T says “like James Brown. I feel good.” He’s lifting weights again, making public appearances again, fully capable of spinning off on 20-minute conversational tangents where he’ll tell you every detail of his life story, whether you ask him or not.

He’ll tell you how he goes to Bed, Bath and Beyond to buy cocoa butter soap (“I’m tough, but I’m tender. I’ve got real soft skin). He’ll tell you why he changed his name before he was a celebrity, because he saw too many black men, his father among them, addressed as “nigger” or “boy”.

“I wanted the first word out of anybody’s mouth, when they were talking to me, to be Mister. And it only costs me \$600.” And

then, as if you doubted him, he'll pull out his driver's license, his checkbook, his American Express card, his passport, all of which identify him, legally, as "Mr. T." This means that if he were to ever get married, he and his wife would be introduced at formal dinners as "Mr. And Mrs. Mr. T."

He works enough to pay his bills, to pay for the gold people expect him to wear when he's making an appearance in public. But mostly he stays at home, working out, keeping to himself working on a book that will either be titled "Cancer Saved My Life" or "Cancer ain't For No Wimps." He hasn't yet made up his mind.

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The lymphoma, he knows, could come back again. But for now, he's healthy, not worried about the future, not shackled by his past.

"People come up to me and they say, 'Mr. T, I heard you were sick.' And I say, "No, you heard I was dealing with cancer. I'm not sick 'till I say I'm sick. ' To me, sick is like broken down. So I say, "Cancer's in my body, but it's not in my mind, my spirit or my soul. The cancer ain't got me until cancer can stop me from praying. Racism didn't stop me from praying. Poverty didn't stop me from praying. So, the cancer ain't got me. Not till I say it does."