

# THE DEDHAM TIMES

*Your Hometown Newspaper*

## **A child shall lead them**

### **Life lessons from a Dedham family in the time of a pandemic**

By Rich Trombetta

May 8, 2020

It seemed innocuous at first. A hairline fracture of a big toe that with some rest and home care would heal in a matter of weeks.

But it didn't heal and the pain became worse. The doctor visits increased as did the worry.

Based on some additional x-rays there was suspicion of a rare bone disease. Then, in January, after more exploration came the unexpected and unthinkable - a cancer diagnosis. The chemotherapy started and a complication presented itself in March in the form of testing positive for COVID-19. Weeks later came the pneumonia.

But, Gavin Brennan, a 7-year-old boy in Dedham, Massachusetts never backed down. Like a prize-fighter taking punch after punch he repeatedly got up off the mat, almost as if to ask, "is that the best you've got?" In a time when many Americans are complaining about the changes the pandemic has brought to their day-to-day lives, one boy, his family and the Dedham community might be able to share some powerful and unique lessons on how to confront challenges and embrace change in the turbulent days ahead.

"We get to choose our own attitude," said Gavin's mom, April Brennan. "You can choose to be in gratitude or you can choose to be in baditude. We chose gratitude."

## **Lesson one - Good news. Bad news. Who knows?**

Gavin Brennan is like most first-graders. He goes to school, plays with his friends and spends time with his family.

“He’s always full of energy,” said Justin Kreger, a family friend whose son is in the same grade as Gavin. “Never complaining. He takes everything in stride.”

In October Gavin was playing with his sister, Alexa-Bay, when she accidentally stepped on his foot while wearing a pair of dress-up boots, causing the hairline fracture. Most parents can picture the scene; one child in pain while the other denies culpability. The day descends into a tailspin as tears are shed and a trip to the emergency room is made.

The bad news? His sister broke his toe. The good news? The accident may have helped save his life.

Because the toe injury was not healing it forced the doctors to keep looking. And testing. And testing even more. While the diagnosis was devastating, they found the cancer earlier than they would have otherwise and were able to start an aggressive treatment plan.

“Once we got an actual prognosis I was really relieved,” April Brennan said. “I know it sounds very odd to say that. Before, I was like, oh my God, he's got a rare bone disease. There's no treatment. And so it's lymphoma, there is treatment and Boston Children's [Hospital] and [the] Dana Farber [Cancer Institute] are the leaders in that realm.”

## **Lesson two - Coronavirus does not care who you are**

The family had the cancer diagnosis and the reinforcements came quickly. Grandparents, family friends and members of the Dedham community took action, helping the Brennan’s work through the trips to and stays at Children’s, providing childcare and even FaceTiming Gavin to

help raise his spirits. Meals were made, cards were written and visits took place. The energy was good.

Then April Brennan noticed she had lost her senses of smell and taste.

Then Tim Brennan, April's husband, started to feel achy.

Finally, the worst case scenario - Gavin tested positive.

April was diagnosed with COVID-19 during a telehealth visit with a physician and Gavin was formally confirmed to have the disease after a test at Children's. Tim was never tested but, although he did not have as severe an illness as April, is convinced he had the virus as well.

"I thought I'm going to die in my room by myself and my child is going to die alone without me" April Brennan said.

In what seemed to be viciously unfair, the Brennans were hurled into further chaos, now dealing with two serious and life threatening illnesses - cancer and coronavirus. Miraculously Alexa-Bay was spared as was Gavin's grandmother, a 75-year-old resident of San Francisco with emphysema who had come to stay with the family.

A virus needs what is known as a host to survive. It doesn't ask your age, your medical history or to see your pay stub. If you are a sufficient host and it can latch-onto you it will. End. Of. Story.

### **Lesson three - Appreciate those around you**

The pandemic has caused people to experience what could be described as an eternal Thanksgiving dinner. While on one hand the food might be great, it is often the family dynamics that create the memories - both good and bad. Many Americans are living their own version of the movie "Groundhog Day" with teenagers trapped with their parents and adults quarantined

with in-laws. Some might even say it's a horror movie. Others, like the Brennans, would suggest you view the situation as a gift.

One of Gavin's grandparents, Helen Hughes, is April Brennan's mom and flew from San Francisco to Boston in February to provide help and support. What started out as a temporary visit has turned into a long-term stay with no plans to leave until the end of May at the earliest.

"I love this family and we're close," she said. "I love Tim's parents and we're close too. You are hurting so much for your own child, her husband [Tim] and your grandson."

Jack Brennan, Tim's dad and Gavin's grandfather, shared similar sentiments.

"There were waves of emotions," he said. "Thank God we're a close and supportive family."

#### **Lesson four - celebrate the big things (and the small things too)**

On April 29, two days after his birthday, Gavin had his last treatment at Children's Hospital in Boston and came home. On April 30, the Dedham community celebrated.

Sirens wailed, horns honked and people cheered as a parade of firetrucks, police cars, trucks from Dedham's department of public works and family friends in cars drove past Gavin's house to welcome him home and wish him a happy birthday.

Deputy Fire Chief Stephen Lynch helped organize the event.

"When I heard about Gavin I said we definitely have to do this for him," Lynch said. "It's inspiring."

Officer Neil Cronin of the Dedham Police, who serves as the town's school resource officer, worked with the fire department and the department of public works to organize the event.

“This has helped me see how fortunate I am,” Cronin said. “I am a father myself.”

Massachusetts State Representative Paul McMurtry, owner of the Dedham Community Theatre in Dedham Square, had the theatre’s marquee changed to say Welcome Home Gavin.

“During these unprecedented times we can all use a story of hope,” McMurtry said. “It makes you stop your life and reflect on what you have. His victory is something this community should be proud of.”

### **Lesson five - help and inspire others**

The Brennan family is grateful for all of the support and care they have received through this difficult time. To help and inspire others who may be experiencing similar hardships the family has started a series of efforts to build awareness and raise funds for organizations like Children’s Hospital.

“My friend helped us launch a [GoFundMe page](#) for Boston Children's oncology unit,” April Brennan said.

They are also trying to launch a movement called #makeyourownobstaclecourseforGavin, a unique way to help families and kids learn how to take on the challenges that life can bring.

“Life is full of obstacle courses and we wanted other kids to get an idea of what fighting cancer is like,” she said. “[Cancer] is like an obstacle course where you’re out of breath at the end. And it can be a beautiful, crazy, fun experience if you allow it to be. It can be a teaching experience if you allow it to be. And you know, such is life, there are lots of ups and downs and that's kind of what dealing with cancer and chemo is like.”

## **Two words sum things up**

The pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to America and the world. While everyone's situation may be different and the struggles people face might be social, economic or health related, there are key lessons that can be applied to anyone. The most powerful piece of advice comes from Gavin himself.

“If you're thinking you're going through a hard time [just know] that if I can do it, you can do it,” he said. “You rock!”