

The Buddy System

Two men join forces to raise awareness about prostate cancer and early detection.

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John Holt and David Emerson could be co-stars in Hollywood's next buddy movie. Affable, vulnerable, straightforward and genuine, the two Johnson County men have an easy rapport with one another. Central casting couldn't have done a better job.

In reality, Holt and Emerson are two men who were walking life's journey on separate paths, met at a fortuitous fork in the road and became instant soul brothers.

"We're just a couple of knuckleheads," says Holt good-naturedly, greeting Emerson with a hearty handshake before settling in to talk about why the duo advocates for the cancer often called the silent killer. "It's quite possible we could have met and become friends under different circumstances. This just happened to bring us together."

A frequent viewer of the FOX 4 newscast, Emerson turned to his wife Mary. "No wonder John hasn't been on the news lately," he recalls saying.

Emerson sent Holt a private Facebook message, sharing that he also had prostate cancer and a foundation, thanking the high-profile television personality for taking a public stand. Holt, who had received hundreds of sentiments from well-wishers, responded to Emerson.

"I was grateful that David reached out," says Holt. "To have a peer I could meet with and compare notes—and especially someone like David who had a foundation and a network in place—was priceless."

The long-time, award-winning co-anchor on FOX 4 had minimally invasive robotic

where the cancer cells have metastasized, including his pelvis, spine and left rib.

"The spine has cleared up, but the pelvis is our main concern," says Emerson, who receives chronic palliative care, including radiation last June, to treat hot spots.

Since meeting, Holt and Emerson have crafted a passionate message of awareness and the importance of early detection that they communicate with anyone—friends, strangers, men, women. Holt updates viewers on his Facebook Page and Emerson blogs, stages annual events through FLHW, speaks to groups and travels the country, addressing corporations like Johnson & Johnson with a to-the-point message.

No excuses, early detection.

BREAKING NEWS

Holt grew up in a family with a history of prostate cancer. His father, a retired physician in Wichita, had a radical prostatectomy and is living a full life and his grandfather died of complications from prostate cancer. According to Holt, it was a matter of time before he received a diagnosis—he just didn't think it would come so early in life.

"I figured I would be in my 60s or 70s before I was diagnosed," says Holt. "It was almost a relief when I received the call because it was caught in the early stages."

Because of Holt's direct family history of prostate cancer, he had regular blood work for years to allow doctors to monitor his PSA levels—one of the indicators that distinguishes between benign prostate conditions and cancer. For several years Holt's levels fluctuated up and down when one day, results showed a substantial spike in his numbers. At his doctor's suggestion, Holt underwent a biopsy and braced himself for the worst.

The call to Holt from his doctor's office came as the veteran newsman was preparing to leave for work. He saw the 913 area code pop up on his cell phone with no numbers following it—and instantly knew what it

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Rewind to Father's Day 2010. David Emerson was multi-tasking—watching a televised golf tournament, thinking about his foundation for advanced prostate cancer—Faith-Love-Hope-Win (FLHW)—and scrolling through his Facebook newsfeed. A post he saw on a friend's Page caught his attention.

"It was from John Holt, the newscaster on WDAF-FOX 4," says Emerson. "He was wishing everyone a Happy Father's Day and encouraging guys to get tested for prostate cancer. He said 98 percent of men who are diagnosed early with prostate cancer—like him—are cured."

surgery on June 7, 2010, for Stage I prostate cancer. Holt sees his doctor every three months for blood work; next month he'll go on a six-month cycle for the next 10 years.

Emerson, a former telecom professional, was diagnosed in Feb. 2005 with Stage IV prostate cancer and has received hormone treatments, chemotherapy, and radiation and is currently enrolled in a clinical trial. He has 642 hours in between oncology appointments—every 28 days. Unlike Holt, Emerson's cancer is advanced—he shares an X-ray on his iPad that reveals dark spots



SPOTLIGHT: JOHN HOLT & DAVID EMERSON

was. The nurse gave Holt the test results, and scheduled an appointment for he and his wife, Suzy, to meet with his physician, Brantley Thrasher, MD, at The University of Kansas Hospital.

Framing the information he received was a top priority for Holt.

“When I was told the test came back positive for cancer, it was actually good news for two reasons,” says Holt. “First, it was caught early. And second, the news I had waited for years to hear had finally arrived. I was disappointed, of course, but there wasn’t a cloud of ‘when’ hanging over my head.”

By the time Holt returned to his Leawood home following the 9 p.m. newscast that night Suzy had compiled pages of information gleaned from online research.

“Suzy was my first advocate,” says Holt. “She started our education process.”

The couple counseled with Thrasher, who laid out options for Holt: watchful waiting or surgery.

“I asked Dr. Thrasher what he would do,” says Holt. “He looked at me, then Suzy, and said ‘If you were my brother, I would get it out.’”

Open communication with his family—including his 22-year-old son and 20-year-old daughter—has been important for Holt. He wants his children, and especially his son, to understand how crucial personal health maintenance is to a long life. And Holt wants to change the dialogue men have about prostate cancer—to put it ahead of typical conversation about sports, cars and stock portfolios.

“My message will always be self-awareness of your health history and your physical state,” says Holt, 52, who has annual physicals, exercises regularly and eats a healthy diet after finding out in his early 20s that he had high cholesterol. “Be proactive.”

FAITH, LOVE, HOPE AND WIN

Emerson considers himself a survivor—he has from the moment he had *the* conversation with his physician in 2005.

“I had experienced severe pain in my right hip,” says Emerson. “It wasn’t muscular, much deeper and would come and go. One day at work it wouldn’t leave.”

Emerson scheduled an appointment with his physician and discussed other symptoms: changes in urination and family history. His father had surgery and radiation for prostate cancer in his 60s; he is now approaching 80 and has been cancer-free for more than 15 years.

Just 10 days following his 42nd birthday on a frigid February evening, Emerson and his wife, Mary, had a message on their answering machine to call his physician regarding results from a test administered during an exam. Emerson had advanced prostate cancer.

“Suddenly I realized that my attitude that I was young and might somehow outlive the possibility of a cancer diagnosis was foolish,” says Emerson. “I was a young man, with late-stage prostate cancer.”

A week later Emerson and his wife met with Bradley Davis, MD, a urologist who gave the couple hope. He told them that Emerson’s attitude of positivity was exactly what the doctor ordered.

“Each day I live I’m a survivor,” says Emerson. “It’s that simple.”

Three months following Emerson’s life-changing diagnosis, he started a 501(c) 3 nonprofit that personifies his motto: Faith-Love-Hope-Win. To date Emerson has staged a dozen golf and disc golf and poker tournaments and raised nearly \$180,000 for prostate cancer research. The mission of FLHW mimics Emerson’s personal goal: to win the battle against advanced prostate cancer by leveraging financial, emotional and intellectual resources within families,

friends, neighbors and communities.

Emerson, who has overhauled his diet (“We eat Mediterranean at home, and little red meat and dairy,” he says), provides an inspirational forward momentum for his 14-year-old son. He is beyond determined to be the victor in his uphill duel with prostate cancer.

“All I can do is share my experience, strength and hope,” says Emerson, his gray-blue eyes flashing a gentle smile.

JUST THE FACTS

John Holt and David Emerson—along with their spouses, Suzy and Mary—can recite verbatim the facts about prostate cancer, risk factors and symptoms. Here is a quick guide to put in your own back pocket—or share with the men in your life.

- Annually, an estimated 220,000 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer. That’s one new case every three minutes.
- One in six men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer. The disease is most common in men over the age of 50; more than 75 percent of prostate cancer cases are diagnosed in men age 65 or older.
- More than 30,000 men fail treatment and die from prostate cancer every year. That’s one every 16.5 minutes.
- Prostate cancer is the most common non-skin cancer in the United States.
- A non-smoking male is more likely to get prostate cancer than the next seven most common cancers combined.
- A man is 33 percent more likely to develop prostate cancer than a woman is to get breast cancer.
- Eating a diet high in fat and/or drinking too much alcohol may increase one’s risk.
- Symptoms include frequent urination, pain/burning during urination; blood in the urine; weak or interrupted urine flow; frequent pain or stiffness in the lower back, hips and/or upper thighs.

For more information on scheduling David Emerson and John Holt to speak, e-mail Emerson at info@flhw.org. To visit David Emerson’s Faith-Love-Hope-Win Foundation, log onto www.flhw.org, www.facebook.com/faithlovehopewin or follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/flhw. For more information on prostate cancer, visit www.pcf.org. To reach John Holt, e-mail him at john.holt@wdaftv4.com.

DOCTOR’S NOTE

Brantley Thrasher, MD is a well known Kansas City urologist and surgeon who says that Holt and Emerson are part of a large fraternity of men with prostate cancer. Early detection of the disease is his mantra.

“The only way that we’re making a difference in this battle and the reason that mortality rates have dropped since the 1990s is early detection,” says Thrasher. “The key is checking the PSA levels, along with a digital rectal exam. Those are essential tools in this fight.”

Thrasher says prostate cancer doesn’t give clear-cut symptoms until the later stages or when it has metastasized or moved to the bones.

“Just because a man feels good doesn’t mean anything,” says Thrasher. “It really is a silent killer. Prostate cancer can be devastating and a life changer for everyone involved.” ❖