

Reflections on Paul Ruwoldt

Reader: Jonathan Darling, Paul's friend and CEO of TRG, Inc.

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Over the past couple years, I've had the opportunity to sit across the table from Paul, and hear updates and stories from his various work assignments. And as Wilma said, he was so good at his job – building relationships, making connections with all kinds of people, and ultimately taking actions that would lead to better health care for people in some of the poorest countries in the world.

And then he would tell me of his adventures, like renting a car in a country in Africa he'd barely heard of... and I must say as the one sort of responsible for him, that that provoked in me a range of feelings...

- 1) Have you lost your mind???
- 2) I'm so glad you didn't get lost, hurt or robbed, and
- 3) Perhaps the strongest feeling of all... Oh how I wish I could have been there too!

Paul had a way of finding common ground with people – it made you feel like you'd known him for your whole life.

And so, in November of 2007, he got his diagnosis of melanoma, and he embarked on yet another journey. And every now and then he would come by my office and sit across the table, and I would hear updates and stories. And I was constantly amazed at how his incredible spirit, his optimism, his good humor, and his determination sustained him in the face of an impossible series of setbacks.

He took on the U.S. healthcare system (no small task) and he gained access to the leading experts in the world on his illness. He never complained about the foul ups, the lost records or delays, but talked instead of the competence of his providers, and the care of those around him.

His spirit never faded... he talked of what it was like to wake up in the back of an ambulance after having a seizure, and without missing a beat would describe the next steps he would be taking to battle this terrible disease.

From the very beginning, he was realistic - he knew what he was up against, that the odds were not in his favor, and yet it was impossible to sit across from this young, vibrant man, and think that he might not make it.

Also... throughout the process, he maintained his commitment to TRG and his technical work... and in between appointments, and treatments, and procedures, he stayed connected to us, to the Capacity project, and colleagues around the world, researching, writing, and making a difference.

One special moment stands out. We had our corporate retreat in August, just when Paul was experiencing nasty side effects from chemo or one of the many treatments he endured. And he and Natalie drove out to West Virginia to be with us for the last day. The moment he walked into the room, we cheered him, gathered around, and finally continued our work with him in our midst. My last memory of that retreat is afterwards, sitting in the bar at the retreat sight (of course) and having a beer with Paul and other colleagues, to talk about our work together.

And somehow, in all of this, he connected with us in other ways too. Our colleague, Jim McCaffery wrote:

And during that year, he did have some good times — even in the face of disappointment, pain and uncertainty. And some of those good — even better — times came when his parents were here. I still remember the laughter we had at NIH when Paul and his parents were trying to explain the finer points of cricket to me (I still don't know what a sticky wicket is, or even more important, what it means to be stumped!), or the wonderful barbecue we had at Steve and Joan's place when we were all there. Paul referred to those times in conversations with me, and sooo much appreciated his parents coming.

And so through his openness and candor, Paul allowed me to walk beside him on this journey, and in partnership with Natalie, through the CaringBridge site, and many other ways, he brought us all along, sharing the twists and turns and above all, inspiring us with his courage.

And then as this next part of his journey appeared so suddenly on the horizon, Paul and Natalie reached out again, to let us know, so that we could be ready, and to be re-assured that he was ready too.

And so, Paul, we are so grateful for the chance to have lived and laughed with you, and for the amazing example of courage and inspiration you have given us, in your long journey home.

Jonathan