

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
David Brudnoy Update
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. My guest on this edition of *About Health* TV needs little introduction to many. His radio program is heard in 38 states. To his fans, he is talk host, intellect, professor, author, and survivor. David Brudnoy has joined me on this set before to talk about living with HIV, and now he's back, in more ways than one. David, thanks for coming back.

DAVID: Thank you, Jeanne. I'm glad to be here again. I just keep coming back, don't I? Like a bad penny.

JEANNE BLAKE: I know, you're a remarkable, remarkable man. You are now, most recently, a cancer survivor, to add to the list of other achievements –

DAVID: Well, I needed a new thing. Every decade or so, some sort of crisis in my life. It's interesting, I didn't expect another one, but maybe every decade I have one of these things, it's okay with me. But faster than a decade –

JEANNE BLAKE: Right, but no more often than that.

DAVID: If I can help it.

JEANNE BLAKE: David, the kind of cancer that you have – in fact, before we went on the air, you said that David Baltimore, the Nobel Prize-winning –

DAVID: Cancer specialist.

JEANNE BLAKE: Cancer specialist, has never heard of Merkel cell carcinoma, so I think you're going to have to explain exactly what it is.

DAVID: Well, it's funny. When it was diagnosed, when I went to the doctor, my doctor, and I said, "I've got this pimple up here, this cyst here," he said, "I don't know, I want to send you to a dermatologist." So down the hall I went, and he said, "Oof," and he did a biopsy, and he said, "Oh, my God," and then he rushed over to another doctor, and she did a biopsy and said, "Yep, Merkel," and

everybody looked at each other: “Merkel? Merkel? Oh, God, it has to come out right away.” So within minutes they’d excised a pimple up here, just looked like this, but when they took it out it was this big. And I began looking it up on the Web to see what it was. It’s not well known, but it is as treatable as many others. It’s like a lung cancer, it’s a small-cell cancer, and they treat it as if it were a lung cancer. It’s unrelated to lung, and even though it appears on the skin it’s not a skin cancer.

JEANNE BLAKE: But it’s a small-cell cancer, so it can travel through the body.

DAVID: Yes, that’s the point – it’s a very fast-moving cancer, and the concern was that if we didn’t catch it right away, before it went below the neck, that it would hit the organs and that would probably be the end of it. End of me, at that point. We hope. With a lot of radiation ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Tell us what – please, make sure that you take my water as well, because I know that you’re going to need it, because you’ve had some damage to your throat – but what was the treatment for this, David?

DAVID: Well, two things. Chemotherapy for three months, which is sort of three days on, and then what they call 18 days of “recovery.” It’s really 18 days of misery, where everything falls apart, you become as pale as a piece of paper, and you’re not only anemic but also very ill. I never had any of the nausea or diarrhea or vomiting that a lot of people do, never had that at all. Adjacent with that, overlapping it, was six weeks of throat radiation. And while they were pretty sure the cancer was on this side, they said, “It may be over here too, so do you think you can handle both sides? It’s doubly hard, doubly long,” etc. I said, “Well, I don’t know what to compare it to.” They said, “Well, it would be somewhat difficult.” That’s like saying giving birth is time-consuming. Somewhat difficult is a euphemism for Oh, my God. So anyway, they start radiating. The radiation itself doesn’t hurt, but after a few days, you begin losing saliva and your mouth becomes filled with bloody tissues. And what it led to after six was, I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t swallow, I couldn’t eat. I had to write notes to people because I couldn’t speak. And I was fed intravenously for the better part of a month and a half, and gradually only was able to drink these horrible drinks like Ensure and Boost and so on. If I ever see one of those again, it will be too early.

JEANNE BLAKE: Even the thought of it must make you nauseous.

DAVID: So I lost 58 pounds in five weeks.

JEANNE BLAKE: We have a picture of you shortly after leaving the hospital, which we'll show. In this picture, you're down 58 pounds from your normal weight.

DAVID: I may have put on a pound or two by then, but it was the end of 31 days in the hospital. I got out of the hospital the day before New Year's, so this is New Year's Eve, and a well-known figure and his wife dropped in to say hello, with a very dear friend of mine, Roman, who's the other guy, the one that doesn't look like Bill or like me. ... spent virtually every day with me in the hospital while I was there. We took this picture, and I keep it there in the kitchen to remind myself of how I looked with no hair, with no weight, and pale as a ghost ...

JEANNE BLAKE: And it's unrelated to your HIV, which I think is such an important point to make.

DAVID: There are some people with Merkel who have HIV, but there's no connection between them. As far as we know, maybe 2 percent of people with Merkel also have HIV or AIDS. In other words, it's unrelated. It's probably related, my doctor thinks, to early x-ray treatment for acne. When I was a teenager, one of the hot new things was to x-ray kids' faces, and he said several patients – he's been looking up the data – evidently had the same sort of thing. Later on, it may have created a vulnerability to the cancer. We're not sure. But it hits largely men in their 60s and 70s, largely white men, and largely men, so it's not for, by and large, women or young people.

JEANNE BLAKE: When I was with you a month ago, your voice was much weaker than it is now, so your recovery continues.

DAVID: It's coming along. Not as well as I'd like it to, but it does get better. We don't know to what extent it will improve, but it certainly is better than writing notes. I didn't think I wanted to do radio with notes. Maybe you could do that, if I knew a sign language, on TV. I don't think a radio talk host unable to talk would be a very successful venture on radio.

JEANNE BLAKE: Last night, it was really fun. I was with you in your studio in your home, which, for your listeners, they can't see that, which is too bad, because it's so beautiful. It's dimly lit and it's really very much like a salon, and friends come by and sit and enjoy being in your home while you're interviewing your guests. Last night it was really fun. Tim Johnson was there with his new book, *God Is in the Questions*. I just want to play for our viewers a little bit of your conversation with Dr. Tim, talking about surviving disease.

[AUDIO CLIP]

DAVID: Would it be fair to say that people whose attitude is positive will tend to try harder, perhaps, to survive and overcome obstacles than people who give up? In other words, we know that giving up, assuming I'm so ill I'll never get better, therefore I'm just going to languish and accept my fate, as opposed to those who say, I'm going to try everything I can to get well – including, if prayer helps you feel that positive –

DR. TIM: Absolutely. That's another level that I didn't allude to, but the benefit of the positive thinking, so-called, that might be very real to an individual. I dismiss some of it, but I certainly believe other aspects of that so-called connection.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: David, what role do you think that attitude plays in one's ability to overcome as much as you're overcoming?

DAVID: If your goal is to get through the treatment, survive the cancer, and your friends buck you up and that – John Keller, my good buddy, would come by and read me ridiculous articles from The New York Times on politics during the whole Howard Dean is up, John Kerry is down thing, and mirthfully looking at that. I couldn't really laugh aloud, but I could sort of [gasp, gasp]. I was enjoying it. Friends would come by and chat with me. Some of them, like our mutual friend Jack, they'd like when I said, "Just talk at me, talk at me," because I can't talk back. He said, "I don't know what to say."

JEANNE BLAKE: Jack had a problem talking at you?

DAVID: He felt that the conversational thing, the usual back and forth, with a guy like me in radio who never is at a loss for words – but it wasn't the lack of words, it was the lack of voice. I didn't have it. So I said to friends, "Just come, don't baby me, just be around, let's talk about fun things. At least let me listen..."

JEANNE BLAKE: But David, you're not saying that someone – for example, I had a friend this past winter who was diagnosed with lung cancer and two months later he was dead. It's not that there was a weakness or a lack of desire to live, or a lack of powerful friendship in his life, so you're not casting blame on people –

DAVID: Oh, no. I don't think that whether – as, remember, the former editor of, what was the name of the magazine? The guy who years ago said they played Marx brothers movies for him, and he felt better, he recovered from cancer for a while. The name escapes me, but he created one of the literary magazines. He said laughter was – my father was in medicine. You can't make this happen. He said, Nature will take its course. Your attitude will help you feel better. And I think the attitude also helps your friends feel better. They don't feel, "Oh, my God, I'm coming and he's going to be morose today." I'm sure I was, but I wanted not to let what was going on inside me to take everybody down. I preferred it when the people who we did allow to come to visit me – because we didn't let everybody come, so I'd actually get some rest – that they would come in with good news and fun and bring me the mail, argue a little bit about should I do this or should I do that. It's just the attitude, from my point of view, had to be encouraging, optimistic, and we'll see what happens. There was no guarantee of survival from the cancer, or even from the treatment. I thought if I got through the treatment, I'd survive the cancer. Because the treatment was pretty darn bad.

JEANNE BLAKE: Sounds pretty brutal.

DAVID: It got better, and it certainly is better now. Except for the voice is raw, as you can tell.

JEANNE BLAKE: Keep drinking water while we listen to what Dr. Tim Johnson had to say about David Brudnoy and the inspiration that you give for overcoming so much. Here's Dr. Tim.

[AUDIO CLIP]

DR. TIM: I think any physician, like myself, has to be in awe of the kind of attitude that David has had toward his illnesses over the years, and especially this most recent battle with cancer. I've read about it from afar, but even in that way, I have just been moved deeply by the way in which he has struggled and addressed his cancer with such courage. It's an amazing feat, and one that he should take some pride in and that we should all learn from.

[END CLIP]

DAVID: I think Tim Johnson is on target there. After all, as a man of faith and also a man of medicine, he understands that attitude helps people get through it. It's sort of like saying when you pray as the recipient of the prayer, which is doubtful, but you, in praying, obviously feel better, so you feel you're reaching into some mode, some part of the cosmos that may help you get better. I've often

talked to people who are really praying for their own purpose and not to have an auditor who'll say, "I'll make you well." Who knows about that. And Tim, of course, doesn't believe in a God that spends his time deciding who will win the football game and who won't. But my sense was, I've been through this before. I was told I'd never walk again back in 1994 –

JEANNE BLAKE: When you had HIV.

DAVID: Before the new drugs. They assumed that I'd have another attack of pneumonia, and that would be the end of it. Fortunately, the new drugs came along, I got better, walked. Obviously I don't do marathons, but I can do a lot of things. And with this thing, I felt – the doctor said to me, Dr. John Clark, the oncologist, said, "Look, I don't like the term remission. I like the term cure. We want to kill the cancer and get you on your way." And at the end, he and the radiologist, Dr. Paul Busey, said, "To the best of our knowledge, the cancer is gone. It's over. You're done." Now, obviously, we'll be doing MRIs and CT scans every few months to find out. They just did one a couple of weeks ago and it was clear. And then there'll be something, when people say survivor, meaning that up to this point you haven't died of the thing you had, and so anybody who's had a cancer knows that it's an ongoing matter of testing to make sure that these symptoms have not returned, the cancer has not come back again. But the main thing is that they believe it did not go below the neck. They did whatever damage they did to my voice and throat by killing it in the region where it was observable, and if it's gone, then it's gone. They dived on a banana peel.

JEANNE BLAKE: People who live with cancer say it's never very far away, though. Is that the case with you?

DAVID: I look at two of my colleagues at Channel 4, Joyce and Charlie, both of them survivors, and going on, and both were assumed not to be able to make it through. I think as Joyce continues to do her work and I mine, I think what we want to do is not spend our time saying, "Oh, my golly, here we are alive," but rather, "Today is today, tomorrow is tomorrow, let's get on with it and things will occur." I will tell you, when I go for the CT scans, as I did two weeks ago, there's a little apprehension. What might they find? And when I talk with the oncologist, he says, "Clear as a bell, you're in good shape." That's a nice feeling. But I don't expect endless longevity. Just let me enjoy what I'm doing as I'm doing it, and I hope the attitude will convey to other people that there's no necessary death sentence because you have a cancer, especially if they are treated early.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, you certainly are enjoying every minute of your life and taking everything out of it. You mentioned earlier that we have a mutual friend in Jack Armitage, and Jack and I went into your kitchen last night. I want to show our viewers just one thing that he took off the shelf. Here's Jack.

[VIDEO CLIP]

JACK: Okay, here's the mask that was built for David, custom made so that they could put it on the table while he was receiving his radiation. As you can see, it's David profile.

JEANNE BLAKE: Not everyone would keep that.

JACK: He loves this, and I think it's something that he sees as kind of a live bust. It's a very current configuration of who he is and what he went through.

JEANNE BLAKE: But not everyone, again, would keep it.

JACK: Well, David is pretty much not everyone. He's a very interesting cat. But for him, this is a very important icon of the time that he spent this past year, and I think that you might ask him about it and he'll tell you just why he kept it.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: So, David, why do you keep the radiation mask?

DAVID: Well, for one thing it looks sort of like a fencing mask, and I can maintain I was in the 1948 Olympics as a fencer. What they do is, they make a mold of your face, and then they have this, that they screw you down when you're doing the radiation, screw you down so your face can't move, and then they zap you with the radiation. And the hope is to go in the right place, so you don't lose your taste buds, and you don't lose your voice entirely. Or, and there's a worse possibility, was quadriplegia. The list of all the things – I said, "Whew, are you telling me that you could zap me into total paralysis?" every day for six weeks. At the end, I got up, I said, "I'm walking, still." ... So I thought it would be kind of fun to have it framed, to put it on the wall, and at the moment I just haven't found a good framer for it. But it's kind of odd looking, isn't it?

JEANNE BLAKE: It's a little ominous.

DAVID: I actually thought I would fall asleep occasionally during the radiation treatments, because it was kind of relaxing. The radiation itself doesn't hurt, and the guys at Mass General were such nice people. I'd wheel myself down there, be wheeled down while I was in the hospital, I would trudge in half the time. I was determined not to miss a day of radiation, because it was sort of like these little rain days or snow days. I couldn't not do it, it would be added at the end. I said it's going to be six weeks, so let's get it over with. I remember once in the hospital, they wheeled me down and forgot me, and I said, "A, I've got to go to the bathroom. B, you've got to get me back to my room." An hour went by. I said, "I'm going to unstrap myself and crawl back to my room."

JEANNE BLAKE: I imagine you probably also said, I have a movie to review.

DAVID: You know, I had to give up a lot of things for a while ... every time between the hospitalizations, I'd go back to school. I was in the hospital 31 days in three blocks of time throughout November and December, so it was four days, 17 days, then 10 days. And in between I would somehow get to school, somehow teach.

JEANNE BLAKE: This is not surprising. You know, last night, I just want to show a clip. One of your students – as I said earlier, your salon is often filled with many people from your past who admire you and have a bond with you. ... Well, she was a journalism student, and I think that you inspired her to reach for the stars, which she's done. Let's hear what this young woman has to say about you.

[VIDEO CLIP]

STUDENT: He has this ability to make you feel like you're the only person in the room and that your opinion, as elementary as it may be, is worth as much as his educated opinion. He's just exceptional, and he makes you feel like you have the capacity to be as exceptional as he is, and in the process influences the way you see your world.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: A lot of students have stopped by and made that comment, that they feel as though they were the only one in the classroom. Has being sick over the last – how many years now that you've been living with HIV?

DAVID: Well, in 1994 I was hospitalized, but the diagnosis was in 1988. But the catastrophic hospitalization thing that I call my time out of mind was 1994.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you think that you approach your teaching, maybe not so much consciously different, but in a broader sense any differently because you're touching these young people's lives and you are looking really, I think, at life differently?

DAVID: Last fall, when I was diagnosed and knew that I was going to go into treatment, and I said to my students, I told everybody – my listeners, my viewers, everybody – What life is is an adventure. I'm going to try my best ... but whatever happens, you'll learn, you'll see a person going through cancer treatment, I'll see how I handle it, we'll learn. I got through it, I made it to the last two classes, so I missed many in between, fortunately colleagues had filled in for me, and at the end I'm there wearing the little cap because I have no hair, weighing about a pound and a half, and I said, "I hope it wasn't too agonizing for you to go through this ..." And then when I came back in January for the spring term, and missed not one day of class. I had TAs who helped out– but all I want you to see is the development of me from this scrawny thing today to what I hope by the end of May will be a lot stronger person. Use it as a learning experience, and know that you do what you can, and if I miss a class ... At the end, I said, Hmm, what do you think? Every one of you missed at least one class, and I didn't. How is that? I'm the guy who's supposed to be dead. I kidded them about that. They then write these anonymous evaluations of the courses, and I just got them the other day, and they were all "Best class I've ever taken" Part of it is, they know that I care enough to want to be there. My dean said, "We want you want you to be with us for years, not just this term. If you don't think you can do it ..." And I went back and forth. Our friend Jack said, "David, you look so horrible, don't go back. You'll frighten the kids." And I said, "Well, you know, they look at themselves when they've got their hair all done up. They'll handle it." But I really must have been terrifying. But as things got better, it was a demonstration from them of determination. I said, "All of you have within you the ability to do more than you might think you do. That is a miracle. Don't assume that you're limited by what you think. Oh, I'll never get that paper done. Oh, I can't do it. Yes, you can."

JEANNE BLAKE: Incredible, powerful message that you were teaching.

DAVID: I think, in a sense, it was a life lesson. In two weeks I'll go back to school, and I'll be in a lot better shape. I'll still need a lot of water, and they'll put up with it, I hope.

JEANNE BLAKE: As Jack and I were walking through your kitchen last night, I took a picture of the refrigerator magnets, because I know, on my refrigerator, I choose carefully the messages that I have

there for my viewing, and for public viewing when people come in, so it's not a random act. And I just thought maybe I would have you address a couple of them. The first one that I was struck by, and sort of has the sense of how loyal a person you are, but it's Loyalty. Talk to me about why you put that on your refrigerator.

DAVID: I think loyalty is what will endure the relationship if anything will. If you're drawn to a person for physical reasons that eventually eases away, but love and loyalty remain, and it builds and builds and builds. In 1994, when I was near death in the hospital for a couple of months, and again last fall, and the subsequent recovery period, that what partially motivated me to want to get better was, I wanted to be deserving of the loyalty and friendship of those who cared. I felt an obligation to them not to go out before I was ready to. And I haven't gotten my will ready yet. I wanted to make sure that things were ... so I have this obligation, a sense that I want to do what I want to do and my friends are going to help this happen.

JEANNE BLAKE: Pesky little details like the will keeping you going.

DAVID: So loyalty is the thing that endures when many other elements of a relationship evanesce, or at least thin out. The loyalty can get nothing but better and better if there's love and support.

JEANNE BLAKE: And the other one, which of course I immediately recognized, being somewhat familiar, *Life is not a dress rehearsal*, which is close to the title of the book you wrote, *Life Is not a Rehearsal*.

DAVID: People keep sending me little things ... In other words, when I wrote that book, about a year and a half after the AIDS thing, I said, you know, I want to make sure every day matters. I'm not a procrastinator, so much as I'm an extender of tasks. I said, I want to extend this – it's a euphemism for procrastination – I want to get things done now, because I don't know if I'll be around tomorrow, and that helps me do my life.

JEANNE BLAKE: I'm going to be very selfish, because I want to end this program by showing my favorite picture in your whole house, and you know which one it is. Here it is, and it's a self-portrait, David. Tell us about this picture.

DAVID: You know, it looks like a self-portrait, but actually it's not.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's not a self-portrait? I've had it wrong all this time?

DAVID: It's my best friend from high school and he's a great pianist, and teaches at Oberlin, a wonderful guy. As a matter of fact, he and two other good friends saw me on the "Today" show shortly after I went back to work in 1995, and they said, we'd like to come out and visit. So with their wives, they came out and spent a week with me, and of course, the poor wives are sitting there looking at us talk about high school. A bad thing to do. ... way back when I was a teenager ... it just reminds me of him and the whole high school thing. I did a lot of paintings that aren't very good. I kind of like that one.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's just so interesting, because when I was in your home a month ago, and walking around, and you've got so much art, I was drawn to that one. I said, That's my favorite one in the house. And to find out that you had done it, I thought, My God, there's no limit to this man's [??].

DAVID: That was about 70 years ago, when I was a teenager. That was a long time ago. ...

JEANNE BLAKE: David, thank you so much for coming in. It's fun to have you here. Continued good health. You're amazing.

DAVID: I'd like to come on some time when I'm not recovering from something.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, we'll plan that.

DAVID: Every once in a while, let me be on *About Health TV* ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Absolutely. Thank you so much. And we want to thank you for joining us on *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake, and I'll see you next time.

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