

## **“When Wakened From A Bad Dream, Don’t You Sometimes Think It’s Real?”**

You are probably a lot like me. In fact, most people always think, “It won’t happen to me. *It can’t happen to my family.*” I know I have said those words, but time changes everything. No one can see the future. If you could, would you really want to?

I remember when he was born. There was no one on earth like him. I remember the way he smelled, the smile on his face, and the way he seemed to take in the room where he was born. This was my new son, and I was a proud father. We gave him the name John Ford and called him John-John.

In the first two years of John’s life I worked in Charleston, South Carolina, and drove back and forth to our home in Charlotte (three and a half hours away) as a “portable radio professional” (the modern phrase for what has happened to so many of us in the radio business post-consolidation). It was a time in which I was absolutely starving to spend time with John. I spent weekends and weeknights when I could in Charlotte, worked hard on my two FM stations in Charleston during the week, and the rest of my time was spent on I-26 and I-77.

Then I became really lucky. A job became available to me where I could work in Charlotte. *I took it.* While this job allowed me to work with radio stations of all different formats all across the country to help boost their ratings, the biggest appeal was that I would be home with John.

You often don’t see things coming toward you, and this was true for me when I accepted this job.

That summer our world took a jarring turn to the left. On July 2, we found a bump on John’s head and took him to the doctor. We scheduled an appointment with an ultrasound specialist at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, and our doctor scheduled an appointment with a surgeon. The ultrasound specialist said, “No worries. This bump is normal. I’ve seen thousands of them.” I asked, “Are you sure it is not cancer?” “No, no. Not cancer. I know,” he said. Still, we were told to keep a scheduled appointment with a surgeon to remove the bump. They would look at the bump after surgery “just to be safe.”

We had been told to expect the “normal” results from the surgery. The surgeon told us after the surgery, “Oh, I’ve seen thousands of these. Normal. No worries. I know.”

Then, the morning of August 16 we called the hospital as we were told to do for results. “The results are not in yet. We’ll call you when they are ready,” they told us. It was not the whole truth.

It is policy (we later learned) to have the pediatrician tell the family bad news because he or she has the relationship with the family. Within five minutes we got the call.

"Go get John right now and bring him here," John's pediatrician said. "Faster better than sooner. We are admitting John to the hospital today."

*My mind raced.* We didn't know exactly what this meant, but we knew it was not good. My mind also flashed back to St. Jude Radiothons I had done. I thought about visiting the hospital and seeing these children with cancer. I thought of Randy Owen and what he started. I thought, "This cannot be true. Not us. *Not John.*"

That afternoon we spent time in 7 Tower. That was the children's cancer ward of Carolinas Medical Center. (Today we have The Levine Children's Hospital [www.levinechildrenshospital.org](http://www.levinechildrenshospital.org) at Carolinas Medical Center.) We met the doctor John would come to call "Dr. Command." I told the doctor later that he would never live long enough to have a better name than that. We had touched down where all the fundraising done over so many years was helping little boys like John all across the country and throughout the world. *It had become personal.*

So began two and a half years of treatment for the dreaded word "leukemia." A darkness prevailed over our house. We went through the motions of our lives as best we could while John fought for his life with a team of doctors I am still teary-eyed about today. I don't care how big and manly you are. When your kid gets leukemia, you cry.

Leukemia brings chemotherapy. That is unlike any terror I have ever seen. It takes your breath away and you spend your time trying to "be strong."

When we found out John had leukemia, we were assigned a person to help us understand. I am almost ashamed to say that I thought of this person as the "Angel of Death" for about two years as the most intense treatment for John was taking place. It terrorized me so much that I would gasp at the sight of this woman. She gave us huge five-inch books about all the things we could expect during treatment (and all the nasty things to look for that I will spare you at this writing).

Today, John is lucky. We have gone through treatment and there are issues for John that may impact him forever. We are learning how cancer treatment can impact children in learning, growing and living throughout their lives. We are lucky. He is alive.

I am grateful. I am grateful to God. I am grateful to the men and women of Carolinas Medical Center. I am grateful to the people at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. I am grateful to everyone who has ever done a Radiothon for St. Jude (or other hospitals doing this work as well).

You've probably heard this before:

1962 Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia 5 Year Survival Rate: 4%.  
2009 Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia 5 Year Survival Rate: 94%.

\*See [www.stjude.org](http://www.stjude.org) for statistics on other survival rates. All have improved drastically because of research at St. Jude.

I am also left with a strong desire to make the right impression upon the people in our business and beyond. Raising money to fight childhood cancer is still critical. The money raised is truly like Angels from God. It allows researchers to increase survival rates. It allows children like John to walk, play and act just like other kids. *He's alive.*

The radio business is crazier than it has ever been. The economic news has a grip on all of us. We are lurching forward into a new year that we hope will bring better news. St. Jude is having their meetings in Memphis (January 15 – 18) with radio and is gearing up for radiothons in 2009 that will literally change the course of lives for children who are not even born yet. That is most worthwhile.

I am insignificant in terms of any of this except that I am a grateful father of a child who has done well in treatment and overcome a lot of odds to be where he is today. I'm proud of John. And I am also proud of my brothers and sisters in Country Radio who have stood up for these children year after year to raise money for the important research at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

If you have done a St. Jude Radiothon or many St. Jude Radiothons, THANK YOU. If you are thinking about doing one, please reach out to the people at Country Cares ([www.countrycares.org](http://www.countrycares.org)). What if the money raised in YOUR radiothon made the difference in finding absolute cures?

There are a lot of challenges in radio today. I urge you to understand that if you are programming or if you are a market manager, you have huge power to lift up your own community, make an impression about the kind of people who are on your team and what they care about, and connect with moms and dads in your market with the power to change lives. What you do by connecting with St. Jude and doing your own radiothon will impact your market for years...and maybe a lifetime.

Please know that I am always available to participate in your radiothon by phone. I volunteer to share my experiences and help raise money if welcomed. This is one cause that I feel stands out above all others. It's not just about my little boy. This is about defeating the things that prey on children and keep them from having happy and healthy childhoods.

While there is always that momentary challenge of holding a fundraiser on your radio station, there are so many examples of highly rated radio stations who do this year after year after year. Each year they raise more money. Each year they continue to dominate their market in ratings and revenue. These people at Country Radio who have taken chances and lifted these children up are true real-life heroes. You can join them and make your work more meaningful than it has ever been.

While I cannot represent the many families who have children with cancer, I have had the experience. It is unlike anything I experienced in radio or in life. I must continue to ask for your help. Now it is more important than ever. Not for me. Not for

John. For the other children and families who don't yet know they will be faced with the fight of their lives.

You really can make the difference between *life and death* for children in this country and around the world. And I thank you in advance from a proud father of a second-grader in remission from Leukemia!

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