



I'm David McNally and I'd like to tell you how I earned my eagle feathers.

My wife, Jo, passed away 10 years ago from ovarian cancer. In addition to my own personal loss, my five children were faced with the loss of their loving and caring mother. I know you will agree there is no replacement for a parent's love and support, but had there been a Gilda's Club in the Twin Cities to help us deal with our loss, it would have been incredibly helpful.

Three years ago I was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma that had metastasized as a lump in my neck. My children now had to witness their father having extensive surgery and a debilitating round of radiation and chemotherapy. Where do you go to talk about and find support when there is the potential to lose yet another parent to this deadly disease?

No matter who you are or what you have accomplished, receiving a diagnosis of cancer means you will probably never feel more vulnerable. Let me share a personal experience that brought home the need for a place for comfort and support, a place to help people hold a positive vision for the future, and one that I believe can play a key role in their healing.

When faced with a life-threatening situation, it is the rare person who can look beyond their immediate survival and give thought to the notion that this experience could eventually be transformative. Clearly, that is how my life was unfolding as I moved through the various phases of cancer treatment.



To ensure that the radiation is focused in the exact area of the neck where the cancer cells might be active, the radiologists mold a plastic "mask" that fully covers the head and top of the shoulders. The mask is used every day of treatment—in my case, 35 days.

Depending on your perspective, the mask can look quite ominous; as an example, it has bolts that screw into the table where I was lying. The purpose is to restrict head movement, as there are so many areas where the wrong angle can result in permanent and significant disability.

Radiation itself is not painful; however, lingering side effects for me include a compromised sense of taste, significant weight loss (I used to look like a running back), lack of saliva and hearing loss. The good news is that today my overall sense of well-being is very good.

As you might imagine, the “mask” does not hold pleasant memories for me. It never occurred to me that anything positive would ever come from being in the confining embrace of that mask for so long. Someone else, however, saw the mask differently. My daughter, Jessie, is an artist and was the driver on one of my daily trips to the hospital. While there she took advantage of the opportunity to observe what I was experiencing.

When Jessie discovered that the hospital threw the masks away following each treatment, she immediately laid claim to mine. Now, you know parents should never ask their older children questions to which they may not like the answer, so my only counsel was the following: “I’ve no idea what you’re going to do with the mask Jessie, but know this: I never want to see that thing again.”

As the months went by, the quest to regain my health and strength absorbed all of my physical, mental, emotional and spiritual resources. What Jessie might be doing with the mask, quite frankly, never entered my mind until one memorable night that would turn out to be one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

My partner, Cheryl, and I were visiting the *St. Paul Art Crawl* where Jessie was one of the featured artists. Of course, as any proud father would do, my daughter’s space was our first stop. Upon entering the room I was drawn immediately to a piece hanging on the far wall.

My eyes could not make out exactly what it was, but my visceral response was so great that I knew it was the mask. I crossed the room very slowly as my emotions were running rampant. As the work of art came into full view, I was looking not at a symbol of my past but at a transformed vision of my future.



On the wall - its eyes peering straight at me - was a magnificent eagle!

Ah, how limiting our thoughts can be. Oh, how life’s setbacks can place false restrictions on the possibilities of what still can be. I have no desire to interpret what my story might mean to you.

But know, however, that in your support of Gilda's Club Twin Cities you will be inspiring thousands of others to hold a personal vision of healing and health. You will be providing hope and, in so doing, you will be transforming the lives of others.