



## PROFILE

*The Riva family: Kate, Brian, Holley and Hayden.*

# The Meaning of Life

*Storage facility owner Brian Riva shares his inspirational story of battling and beating cancer.*

By Tom Comi

As Brian Riva was driving down the road recently, his 8-year-old son Hayden turned to him and said, “Dad, fighting cancer is hard. But you did it.”

Brian admits he almost had to pull off the road to gain his composure. He was well aware what he had endured and conquered over the past five years, but it was at that moment that it really hit him what his fight for life was all about. It was about Hayden; it was about his wife, Kate, and their 10-year old daughter, Holley; and it was about his brother, Michael, and their parents, Mickey and Tanya.

Brian, along with his brother and parents, is part of a family business that owns and operates eight storage facilities under three different names in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont. And up until February 28 of 2005, it seemed like his personal and professional lives couldn’t be any better.

But on that fateful day while on family vacation in Florida, Brian Riva’s world was rocked.

“I was feeling pain throughout the lower left back and wrapping around into the left quad,” he vividly recalled.

“The pain grew increasingly more each minute of each day, to the point that I could not sleep and my ability to walk became less and less.”

Fast forward a little over a month later, and an MRI would reveal a tumor four inches wide by ten inches long growing through the pelvic cavity and along his spine. The doctors prepared Brian and his family for the very-real possibility that it could be sarcoma, a very deadly cancer that could have taken his life in a matter of months.

“We had to wait five days for the biopsy to come back,” he said. “The

diagnosis came back as non-Hodgkin's B-cell lymphoma. It's a very aggressive form of cancer, but the more aggressive the cells, the better chance of fighting and curing the disease. I got the best of the three choices that we were preparing for. This diagnosis was the only one that gave us something to fight and cure. My wife and mother were hugging each other. I won the cancer lottery!"

## In Treatment

The news was indeed positive given the alternatives. But that was only the beginning of what was in store for Brian and his family in next eight months. Less than a week after his MRI, he was put on the first of seven chemotherapy treatments and then 25 sessions of radiation. Over the course of that time, he also had to endure being confined to bed, lengthy hospital stays, bone marrow tests, seven blood transfusions, a blood clot in his leg, rashes, fevers, back-to-back episodes of kidney stones and a case of shingles.

But there was no medicine or inner strength that could have possibly dampened the pain he felt when a neurologist told him the femoral nerve to his left quad was permanently severed and that he would not be able to walk without a cane or brace.

"My wife and I probably cried for three hours after hearing that news," he said. "That was the hardest part of this whole thing for me. My children were five and three at the time, and I was being told I was never going to run or jump with them. I will never be able to react quickly enough to keep them out of harm's way. I really struggled with that."

Kate Riva said her children were well aware that their father was sick and suffering, and she admitted that they provided the perspective and inspiration both she and her husband needed to get by.

"They kept us going," she said. "We would talk about Brian's cancer very

openly. It was harder some times than others. Brian's leg was something the kids focused on about him being sick. But Daddy's leg was what made sense to them. It was their visual of what the cancer was to them. It was what kept Daddy in bed.

"Holley and Hayden would visit Brian every so often in the hospital," she continued. "The nurses were great. They taught them how to listen to his heart with the stethoscope and take his blood pressure. They would draw pictures for him to decorate the wall of his room. Holley's entire class made a huge mural of an underwater ocean scene. We would bring this and Hayden's artwork along with photos of everyone to keep Brian's room the most decorated room on the floor."

Michael Riva, who is two years younger than Brian, said it was difficult dealing with the prospect of losing his brother.

"Anyone that has gone through anything remotely close to this has had those thoughts," he admitted. "Luckily for us, for me, the outcome was very good once they knew what they were dealing with. For me, it was a matter of having faith in that positive outcome and not letting myself get wrapped up in the bad thoughts. There are a lot of people out there who get a different prognosis, and that is something I hope I never have to deal with."

## Family Matters

Mickey and Tanya Riva started the business with one storage facility in 1989, and the family has since expanded it to eight locations under three different names. Stor-It-All has facilities in Connecticut and Massachusetts, All-Star Storage has three sites in Connecticut, and Bennington Self Storage is located in Vermont.

Being out of work for a year would be tough on any businessperson, but Brian was fortunate he had his family around in both a personal and professional capacity. They were there by his side throughout his treatments,

and they were able to cover for him while he was sidelined.

"I have gained a greater appreciation for being so lucky to be involved in a family business," he said. "We could have been in huge trouble if it were not for a family business. I was out of commission for basically an entire year. If it were not for the family business, I would have never been able to pay our bills and keep the family rolling. For that, I am forever grateful."

He is also appreciative of the role Kate played both at home as a mother for his children and as a wife who had essentially become his full time nurse.

"The ordeal that we went through put my wife onto an entirely different plateau—one that I thought never existed," he said. "She was amazing. She never showed fear or doubt. She put up with all my moods and whining. I honestly do not think I can ever repay her for what she did. She was my rock and my pillow."

Michael and Brian are taking over more and more of the business as their parents slowly edge closer to retirement. Sharing in that work with his brother and coping with his illness has also gave Michael a new perspective on how to juggle his own personal and professional lives.

"You really never know when something is going to happen," Michael said. "His cancer literally came from out of nowhere. I think I now have a greater understanding that I need to be doing what makes me happy and working towards providing for my family in the event something like this happens to me."

## Lessons Learned

Although Brian is cautious about using the term "cancer-free" to describe his condition, his prognosis is very good. His immune system has essentially been wiped out due to the chemo, so he still has to undergo transfusions every four weeks to ensure he has enough antibodies to fight off viruses.

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But that is a small price to pay when he considers what could have been, which is why you will rarely if ever hear him complain about the cancer or his damaged leg. And anybody who has met Brian knows how contagious his personality, sense of humor and positive outlook can be.

Brian's wife, Kate, said people shouldn't dismiss the meaning of sayings such as "don't take things for granted," "live life for today" and "be thankful for what you have."

"You usually hear these sayings after someone has died or is terminally sick," she said. "Brian, his family and I know what these mean, and we hope no one else would have to learn it our way. It means to take a moment every day to say thank you to the world around you. Acknowledge where

you are today; and if you aren't happy with it, start changing it now.

"Brian, Holley, Hayden and I have had our lives changed, but it isn't over," she continued. "We are like everyone else trying to do the best we can with the things we are dealt. Our book isn't done. The chapters are still being written. It can be changed at any time. Until it is in ink, we have some say on how it is going to be written."

The Riva brothers are different in many ways, including the roles they play within in the company. But they are also very similar, especially in their personal lives. Michael and his wife, Sarah, have a daughter (Ellie, 20 months old) and another baby on the way, so Brian's role as a husband and father really hit home.

"I can't even relate to what he went through, and I was standing right

there," said Michael, who sits on the SSA board of directors. "For me, it's more about watching someone go through something like this and realizing what you as a human being are capable of. There is nothing I have gone through that is in any way, shape or form comparable to what he went through, and I remind myself of that every day."

So what message does Brian Riva have for those who have now heard his story?

"Be thankful you are healthy and blessed to be surrounded by family and friends," he said. "And if something happens, figure out a way to work around it. I go to as many activities as I can for my kids. You never know if you will be there tomorrow to see them. Life is good." ❖



Brian's family, shown here in 2005, was by his side throughout his treatment and recovery.