



Allies against cancer

Jennifer Fisher (Jen): If you are a loyal listener to the WorkWell podcast, then you know that I am a breast cancer survivor. I was diagnosed in May of 2016. It is something that I talk about often because it's a big part of who I am, but there is one aspect to my recovery journey that I don't talk about enough. It's the people, the people who helped me and supported me along the way. Not just my friends and family, but the other patients and caregivers who I met that mentored me through one of the toughest challenges of my life. This is the WorkWell Podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

Jonny Imerman (Jonny): I moved to Chicago from Detroit and I remember thinking at one point at 28 when I was finishing, if I live to see 30 years old, it is going to be the greatest success ever. So, it is like all I wanted is to see 30, and it is amazing how lucky we are in life. We go through these challenges and now this is all just bonus time.

Jen: I am here with Jonny Imerman. Jonny is a cancer survivor who co-founded Imerman Angels. It is a nonprofit organization that connects a cancer fighter or caregiver with someone who has fought and survived the same cancer. Carl knows firsthand the impact that Imerman Angels has on families battling cancer.

Carl Allegretti (Carl): It was rough on me. I am not embarrassed about this. I live about an hour away. When it first happened, it took me an hour. All the way home, I cried all the way home, pulled in the driveway, had to stop, okay? Had to stop because no one could see those emotions from me. I had at least put on a strong face, but physically, Jen, Jonny, I did not take good care of myself.

Jen: I am also joined by my colleague and friend Carl Allegretti, the managing partner of Deloitte's Chicago practice and someone who was a source of strength for me during my own cancer battle. So, Jonny, I want to start with you. Tell me your story and how you came to create Imerman Angels.

Jonny: Thank you Jen and thank you Carl. I appreciate you guys having me. I am a lucky guy. I grew up in the Detroit area. In my twenties, at 26 years old, all of a sudden got diagnosed with testicular cancer, was the last thing in the world I was thinking about. You are hanging out with friends, you are going on dates...

Jen: Being a 26-year-old.

Jonny: Thinking you are just a normal person trying to grow up and figure out who you are and what you want to do with your life and career. And I immediately went into surgery, went into chemo. Surgery is the better part of two years. I was either living back at my mom's house and she was driving me for 8 hours of chemo, or I was at the hospital. I just kind of looked at life differently and decided to quit my corporate job in commercial real estate and I moved to Chicago from Detroit and I remember thinking at one point at 28 when I was finishing if I live to see 30 years old, it is going to be the greatest success ever. So, it is like all I wanted was to see 30, and it is amazing how lucky we are in life. We go through these challenges and now this is all just bonus time. But obviously, it leaves a big impact. It definitely changed my career. I looked at life I think with a different perspective. A group of survivors got together to say: Hey, look, we can impact those who fight cancer today with our stories, with our friendship, with the knowledge and the experience. We are all scared when it starts. So, we tried to create a system to empower people with cancer and we created an organization, a nonprofit that we are blessed to be the largest in the world of its type, and it's called Imerman Angels, and we match a survivor up with someone one-to-one fighting the same cancer, same age, same gender, everything is the same. It's like your twin, but this person has been through it and they can coach you and mentor you on the way.

Jen: Talk to me about this notion of psychosocial support and why it's critical to cancer patients' journey, but really kind of all aspects of life where we might struggle with something so dramatic or unexpected.

Jonny: I think that the mind piece is such a huge piece in everything in life. I mean really have the mind and the body and I think they are swirled together inseparably. And you have to treat both of them, probably starting with the mind, but next the body and treat them as healthy and well as you can. I think it is pretty typical that families like all three of us who have been really deeply affected by cancer, we start analyzing what can we do to keep our mind low stress. What can we do to keep our minds centered and focused in the moment so that we can enjoy the people we love and work on projects that are important and be in the moment? It starts with a healthy mind and body.

Jen: I happen to agree with you. Carl, I am going to switch to you. I know this is something you have experienced firsthand as a caregiver for your son. So, can you tell us a little bit about your story and then tell us how you got connected with Imerman Angels and what that has meant to you in your life and your family's life.

Carl: Sure Jen, it has been great being here with two friends and people that have actually battled and beat it, you guys are my heroes. Jen, you and I were working together, go back to 2007 and I was in your hometown on vacation. I have got two boys, Joey and Nicky. I am not so sure a 28-year-old and a 23-year-old appreciate being referred to as Joey and Nicky now, but it is always going to be about Joey and Nicky. But they were young then, and Joey my oldest was struggling with breathing in December. He was wrestling and he had a real tough time breathing and we kept going back and forth to the doctor and they

said it was bronchitis. Okay, everybody is sick in Chicago in December. I get it. We went to the Orange Bowl and he couldn't breathe going down the exit ramp and I said, "Tammy, I am done." I said either we are going home tomorrow, or I am taking him to a doctor. At 2 o'clock in the morning, I took him to Miami Children's. He felt better. They put him on a breathing machine. I said, "Doc, x-ray his chest, let's see what's in there." 6 AM the doc came out and said there is a mass around his heart, his esophagus, he has leukemia. So, I got the news and we started the journey. We started the journey, Jonny. By 10 o'clock that night, he was on chemo and someone put me in touch. We wanted Joey to talk to somebody. I wanted to talk to parents that had been through similar issues and my wife Tammy said, do what you need to do, he is going to be fine. Okay, but that is how she handled it. That is how she handled it. My wife is the rock, okay? Everybody handles things differently, and I wanted information. I wanted to talk to somebody, which is your mission, Jonny, the Imerman Angels, that no one goes through cancer alone. You brought down a mentee, you found an athlete that Joey could relate to that had leukemia and they built the relationship. Then I talked to a couple of parents. Just hearing good stories helped me get through it. Again, everybody needs somebody to help them through this and everybody gets through it a little bit differently. And the great thing is, well, Joey got married a year and a half ago because of the support that he had, the strength, the courage. And who was at the wedding? Jonny. So, that is such a cool story and I am forever indebted to what you did and the relationship. Joey came back and he ran his first marathon, the Chicago Marathon, in October of 2017 or 2018. He ran for Imerman Angels. And one of the coolest things around mile 22, my other son some people may know is now a rookie on the Kansas City Chiefs, but at that point in time, he was playing football at Illinois. The Saturday before, he played at Rutgers in New Jersey. He landed that night, he drove home, and he met his brother at mile 22 and ran a little bit with him to help motivate him to get to the finish line. So yeah, people get through it in a lot of different ways and there are all these great stories, but no one fights it alone or no one should fight it alone.

Jen: So, Jonny, I want to go back to some of your comments around it's the body and the mind. It's all connected, but can you talk a little bit more about what psychosocial support is and why that is so important? I mean, I think we can all kind of infer, especially from Carl's story, my own story about surrounding yourself with others who prop you up, who help you fight, who help you get through it, whatever it is, whether it is cancer or something else.

Jonny: I totally agree, and I think we all agree. The mind is so key in the cancer fight. Focusing on Joey for a second when he was going through it, he is going through treatments, he is still wrestling, this kid, he is on chemo and he loses by one point in the finals and then the next year he beats cancer, comes back and wins it. You want to talk about mental strength in a teenager, to have that sort of determination and focus to be able to still have goals and not just stop because you are sick. I mean, that is a great example of power of the mind and a super kid.

Jen: You are getting choked up, people can't see it, but Jonny is getting choked up.

Jonny: I cry at least once every day and I feel like if we don't do that, we are not really living connected to things that really matter in the world. So, I usually look forward to a good cry at least once a day. This might actually be number two today. So, thank you, Jen.

Jen: We can pause if you need a good cry.

Jonny: That's alright. I will power through it. I just let the tears roll, I don't even wipe them away anymore, I think it is healthy. Before I answer that question, I want to point out something great that Carl said. Because Joey's mom, Carl's wife, was like, I am good, you do what you need to do, I am going to focus here with my kid, and he is going to beat it. But I love that, because it does really illustrate the need that everyone is different. I mean, the least likely group to reach out to Imerman Angels for support are men over, probably, 55. So, this is a lot about you too, buddy, that you are someone who can reach out because everybody needs it. I think everyone needs it. Cancer is traumatic for the cancer fighter as we all know, and it is traumatic for the parents; it is traumatic for the siblings. Just like Nicky coming back, I mean that is love coming back on that flight. But back to your question, the need for psychosocial support, I think there are a lot of ways to solve this problem. There are things like group support where a group of breast cancer survivors, I don't know if you took advantage of that Jen, hope you did, wonderful, I love it – community, right? Sharing information, tips. Maybe one of the women in that support group is 24 and she doesn't have kids yet, and are these chemos going to take away that ability? That is tough, tough stuff. Dating, when you look different having a mastectomy, any sort of surgery, when you feel different, your body is different, these are hard issues for a younger person and an older person, too.

Jen: I was going to say they are equally as hard for older, if I am older, I don't know, I have a birthday coming up, so I am feeling older.

Jonny: Still young, live young. That is the key.

Jen: The point is I think it is hard for everybody regardless.

Jonny: It is hard for everybody. Some people find community that way, other people find community kind of like Carl said, I wanted to talk one on one with another dad. That is really where I would be, too, had we had Imerman Angels when I was diagnosed. I would have just wanted a buddy that was like in his 20s who is like, oh yeah, I go to the gym every day. Here is what you should expect when you start chemo. You can work out maybe one day a week, two days a week. You are going to be at 40%, 60%. I just didn't know the answer to these questions because I didn't know any other young adults in 2001 who had gone through the same chemo and same treatments. But one thing is for sure is that there is tons of research that proves over and over that people that are more optimistic, that are more positive, that are happier, that are in a laughing and a good mood during cancer, they do better. Period. They simply beat cancer more often, they live longer lives, they are more likely if they are going to thrive with it and it's stage 4, they might live three, four times the data in many cases, but the data really, really proves that people that are happier do better. And there is only more and more research coming out on piles and piles of other research, and I think it just proves that we need that. You cannot fight this alone, you cannot fight this in your house by yourself. That leads to depression, to be straightforward for people sort of disconnecting.

Jen: That really resonates with me I think after coming out of my own fight with cancer. One of the...part of my mission is to say, look, here is my cellphone number. Text me at any time with any question that you might think is the most ridiculous question in the world. I am here for you and that was my commitment coming out of this. Not only to myself to say how do I pay it forward, but I had so much of that support from others going through it within Deloitte and externally that it made such an incredible difference to me. So that

sense of community, sometimes I just need to talk about it. I don't need you to fix it or solve it or even say anything, just, like, listen to me and tell me you love me.

Jonny: How did it make you feel, not to ask you a question, but how did it make you feel through sharing and opening yourself up and giving back to these people?

Jen: So, I think the very first time I shared my story, it was scary because it's very vulnerable to talk about the scars and the changes and it's traumatic for everyone, I think in particular women, losing your hair, losing your eyebrows. You look at yourself and you don't recognize the person that you see in the mirror. And that's really hard, and I think sharing it for the first time just takes you back to that place of how hard it is. But what you also realize through the process is that hair grows back, and I actually like my hair better now so that is kind of cool. Those are things that you share with others is like, yeah, you are going to lose your hair and it is hard, to me that actually might have been the hardest thing and I think a lot of people share that sentiment but it's emotional also because I have survived and it also reminds me of the people that didn't make it which is always, I mean it is kind of sad, there is way too many that didn't make it. So, it is one of those bittersweet things that no matter when I share it, it brings up a lot of emotion. But in sharing my story, it has created a sense of community and permission and belonging for others to reach out and say hey, this is okay, and I am going to make it, or there are people who are here to support me. Carl, I want to go back to you. As a caregiver, caregivers need love too, but they are often an underserved population, especially when you are taking care of somebody that you love, or you care deeply about. As human beings, our inclination is to pour everything into that other person and forget about taking care of ourselves. What are your tips for caregivers taking care of themselves or seeking support as you did, asking to talk to others and creating a community?

Carl: It's interesting Jen. When I answer that question when I talk to people that are in the situation that I was, I say learn from my mistake, because I put everything into my son and him getting better, whatever he wanted to do. He was a really interesting case. He would have chemo in the morning, and he would be in the gym that night. So, if you ever think you are having a tough workout, go work out with somebody that had chemo in the morning. And then one of the highlights of my career here at Deloitte is Jen and her journey. We had a partner meeting in Vegas a few years ago and she had a bootcamp and we had partners, she was my partner and she was battling it.

Jen: I was in the middle of chemo.

Carl: She was in the middle of chemo. So, two points. One, if you ever think you are having a hard workout, go work out with somebody who is battling something. But then you see that, okay? I saw that with Joey and then that workout with Jen, I saw it. Nothing is going to stop us, nothing is going to stop us. I remember cutting, working with Joey and I saw he was not feeling good and I said, okay we are done, last set. He said, I am not done yet. So, I knew from that point, nothing was going to beat that kid and he finished the workout. So that is not a direct answer to your question, but I put everything into him. So now the caregiver point. I took terrible care of myself and it changed my life. I did not sleep well, I was always a big exercise guy. I stopped. When we beat the journey, when we got through the journey, I got back at it, but then I realized how much better I would have been for Joey, probably for my wife Tammy and Nicky. It was rough on me. I am not embarrassed about this, I live about an hour away. When it first happened, it took me an hour. All the way home, I cried all the way home, pulled in the driveway, had to stop because no one

could see those emotions from me. I had at least put on a strong face but physically Jen and Jonny, I did not take good care of myself. So, what I do tell caregivers, I know you have got limited time and you want to sit there and watch, and you are going to put everything you can into your loved one. Go for it, but take a little bit of time, let him sleep. While they are sleeping, go and do whatever you need to do for yourself because the better you are, the better you will be for that person and the job that you have, which is a very important job on this journey.

Jonny: I know Carl very well and he knows me very well. I never heard that story. It reminds me of my mom, too. I never saw my mom cry during treatment and then I said to my brother, after two years of this, I am like, "Joe, how has Mom not broke down and cried?" And he goes, "She has cried." She was walking down the hallway, did what she needed to do in the cancer center, but never in front. So that definitely strikes a chord right there. Advice, now this is an important topic because no one expects, like the three of us who have been through cancer, expects other people who have not to really understand what to say or do, and I think that is key. We are not going to judge them. We don't expect people to get it, but the best advice that I feel is there are really five things you can do. You send text messages or email but say five things: I love you; I care about you; thinking about you; sending you good energy; hope it's a good day. If you send those statements that are positive and loving to a friend who is sick. And notice that those were all like positive statements, but none of them end in a question mark. Because when you have a question mark, you ask a question, it does pull that person, have a responsibility to reply. We all know when you are going through it, there is a lot going on and it is difficult and there are things like blood clots midstream and chemotherapy. There are things like we thought the cancer was out after a mastectomy and, oh my gosh, we see three more tumors. We're going right back in for Rush. There's so many – it is anything from A to B and it is so many things happening. That person should never feel, the cancer patient, pressure to respond. If they want to talk about it with you, they will let you know. Take their guidance. If you are a close enough friend, which hopefully you are, they are going to open up to you and they will tell you, but you really don't have to ask more about it too much, I think, with a close friend. It is better to make I love you, care about you, thinking about you, sending you good energy, those little texts. I used to get those from friends. One of my buddies used to leave voice mails, a guy friend of mine from growing up, and say, "I love you Jonny, you are my boy, you are going to beat this." And, I couldn't even call back, I couldn't text back, but every one of those, sometimes multiple times, I would listen to it over and over just for motivation.

Jen: I would add, one of the things that I personally struggled with is I had a ton of support. I was very fortunate, people texting me, showing up to chemo, basically anything that I needed anyone to do. Where I actually struggled was after it was all over. When you are done with chemo, when you are done with all the doctors' appointments, when you are done with the surgeries, and you are celebrating, and everyone is celebrating and thrilled and happy for you because you are done. And you are kind of like, okay, what next? You have been in this mode of fighting for so long and you have had the support. Again, not bad intentions but everybody is like, all right, Jen got through this, we are all thrilled, we are all happy, we are moving on. Which is the right thing to do, but I was like, where did everybody go and what am I supposed to do now and what's my new normal? So, I always encourage people don't stop supporting those because chemo is over or because surgery is over, because for me the hardest part was after all of that. Going through it sucked, don't get me wrong, but the hardest part was after and what is new normal. And you have all

these fears of what if it comes back, oh my god, my knee hurts, maybe I have kneecap cancer. It is like you have all of these irrational thoughts of like anytime anything hurts or you have a headache. How to deal with that on a mental and emotional level is where I really struggled was after. So, I always like to tell people is keep at it for a while after, not just during, because they still really need you. What's your advice Carl?

Carl: I agree with both of you. I had a friend that called me every day. He didn't ask questions, but I knew he was with me every day. So that just agrees with your point. I am going to take it a little bit different direction, but this is a father whose daughter did not survive. You know what, you don't know what to say and I learned from him. My son lived, his daughter lost the battle to leukemia after three tries. 100% bone marrow transplant and it did not work. You know what, I have known this guy forever and I wrote him notes and cards. Then I didn't know what to say and then on Thanksgiving he sent me a note, Happy Thanksgiving, and I said how could this guy do it before I sent him a note. So, my point is don't change, don't shy away. Don't shy away. I learned from him. My most important things in my life are my family and I could never imagine what he has now lived through that's a couple of months old and he has been relentless. I got a text last weekend, you know what, I don't want to bother Nicky but wish him good luck in the game. Don't change. Don't change, don't shy away and I learned from a guy that lost his oldest daughter. Don't change.

Jonny: 100% agree with that. It's worse to say nothing.

Jen: Don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Carl: I was so mad at myself.

Jen: Saying something and don't be worried about because to your point, we understand. I mean like if you say the wrong thing, we know that it is not. What is the wrong thing? We know that it is coming from a good place, and I think the "don't change" point, Carl, is incredibly powerful because for me, when I was going through it, I craved a sense of normalcy. I didn't want to sit around and be depressed about the fact that I had cancer. I wanted my friends and my family, and I wanted to go out and I wanted to feel like a normal person and sometimes I didn't feel like a normal person. Sometimes I just wanted to be in bed, but when I wanted to feel like a normal person, I wanted those people around me and to your point, to not change, to have the same ridiculous conversations that we had, you know, like live life and be happy and be joyful and not have to always be fighting or in that mode of cancer land, kind of having those opportunities to get out of it. I want to cover one other topic and we have touched on it throughout our conversation. I think a lot of us, Carl and myself, once you go through something – you – it's the whole reason you started your organization, is because you have this sense of wanting to give back, so what is the impact on the mentor?

Jonny: You guys are both awesome, you both do it, you both share and you talked earlier a little bit, Jen specifically, about the people that you shared your story, it was hard, I get that. It was hard for me too, I think for a lot of us to dig back in really tough journey times in our lives. And to really answer your question Jen, how does it make us feel by mentoring? We as a group of kids in the 20s going door to door in Detroit on Saturday because we knew all the doctors and a bunch of survivors. We went to the docs and said, "Hey, which rooms really need pump ups, which of these kids are alone?" And we will just walk in, introduce ourselves, talk to them and give them a pump up. And we didn't really know what we were

doing other than they needed it and we were recent survivors and we knew that we could just give them some positive energy, but what we have learned and that slowly morphed into what is now known as Imerman Angels, it's healing and it's a sense of purpose. Sucks at many times, and it does. It is scary and hard, but when all of a sudden you are saying, whatever it is, if you wrap it up in a box and you are giving it to help someone else, that's a gift. Your story, your friendship, you are volunteering your time. Survivors do this because we are grateful and we care but in that process of giving that gift, we heal and we find peace and we stop thinking, oh my god is my cancer coming back? Oh my god I feel this, like in the kneecap like you said Jen. We all have that by the way. I think that is universal. If you bump on your neck...

Jen: You know my ear hurts. Albert, do you think I have ear cancer? He is like, okay, really? Like, no.

Jonny: We all do this stuff. We all get it, we all do it and I think the way to release the fear of it coming back in ourselves and finding the peace in the world is by sharing and giving back to sort of take the spotlight off of ourselves and our own fears and now it is on someone else and we are helping them through it. I think that is how we heal, that is how we release the fear of it coming back, and that is how we channel something from hard and painful and scary into positive.

Jen: Can you follow that up Carl?

Carl: It is always tough following you two, especially because you two beat it, and you have lived it and Joey has beat it. I can't imagine, okay this lump here, I do it from a father's perspective. For years, every time Joey coughed, I said, it is coming back. So, I will do whatever I can to help anybody that is helping a child through it, their child through it. The relationship that we built Jonny. 18 months ago, my mom was diagnosed with lung cancer. Okay, alright. You said, "This is who I know at Rush, here is the best, this is what you need to do." So, who knows whenever you are going to need it or a friend's going to need it, and you do the very best you can, and we all pull each other through.

Jen: We do, and I can attest to Carl's support and to your point, many of those positive text messages, him calling me a champ, I think he checked in, he knew, he knew my chemo schedule.

Carl: I wear two bands around my wrist. I have got the blue band for Joey and the pink band for my friend John and it hasn't come off and everybody handles it a different way. My wife took hers off.

Jen: I burned mine.

Carl: But everybody has... Joey, we never put it on.

Jen: I burned it. I was done. This has been an incredibly emotional and powerful conversation. I want to thank both of you for taking the time to spend with us today.

Carl: It was great.

Jonny: You are both awesome. Thank you so much for having us.

Jen: I am so grateful Jonny and Carl could be with us today. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more, and if you like

the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on twitter @Jenfish23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback. Of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.