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## CAUCUS ROOM

# My Connection to Congressman Payne

By Carl Golden | April 13, 2022, 10:11 am | in **Caucus Room** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/caucus-room/>)



It is fair to say that, politically at least, Congressman Donald Payne Jr. and I do not have a great deal in common. Our party affiliations differ and, in general terms, we hold opposing but respectful views on policy issues and government's response to them.

Consequently, when the Congressman takes a leadership role on an issue on which our interests coincide and our political gap is bridged, it is time for me to take note.

Such is the case with his introduction of legislation to improve access to cancer screenings by requiring Medicare to cover the cost of blood based tests to indicate a risk for colon cancer.

By identifying the potential for colon cancer, the test would provide access to further screening to determine the level of risk of developing the disease and to undergo additional procedures for early stage detection, a crucial component in halting its' spread. Requiring Medicare to assume the cost of the test would incentivize more people to undergo one.

Payne's father and predecessor in Congress died of colon cancer 10 years ago.

The American Cancer Society has estimated that more than 4,000 cases of colon cancer will be diagnosed in New Jersey this year and nearly 1,400 will die from it. Nationally, according to the Society, it is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths and an estimated 52,000 people will succumb to it this year.

My interest? Twenty-seven years ago, I was one of the thousands diagnosed with colon cancer and fortunate enough to be one of the thousands who survived it.

It is an insidious disease that strikes without regard for race, gender or age, often without warning signs until it has advanced to a point where survival is problematic.

For me, the warning sign came on like a four alarm fire siren on a warm day in late May in 1995 when, strolling with my wife along a street festival in Bordentown, I collapsed on the sidewalk, was scooped up by EMS personnel and rushed by ambulance to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at Hamilton.

Emergency room treatment revealed internal bleeding caused my blood pressure to plummet, resulting in my very public collapse.

A day later, the source of the bleeding was found to be a cancerous growth in my colon. Immediate surgery was followed by a 10-day hospital stay, a seven-week absence from work (I was serving as press secretary to Gov. Christie Whitman), and once a week intravenous and oral chemotherapy treatments for a year.

People who live with cancer are frequently referred to as courageous or brave -- and rightly so -- as they confront the reality of life or death every day. I didn't consider myself courageous or brave; hell, I was just plain scared.

My reality emerged regularly every Friday afternoon when my wife drove me to the hospital where I shared a small room with others enduring a similar experience, settled into a recliner-like chair with overly broad arms on both sides and averted my eyes while a nurse inserted a needle into the crook of my arm, and opened the valve on a plastic tube to allow cancer-killing poison to flow into my system.

Every Friday afternoon; fifty-two times that needle went into alternate arms to avoid a buildup of needle tracks.

The car ride home was a 30-minute contest to determine whether I'd remain awake or whether fatigue would overwhelm me and I'd need assistance to make it to the living room couch.

Fighting cancer is a solitary battle -- it's you against it -- but knowing support is close by helps ease the anxiety.

I may have been the one with the needle in my arm every Friday, but my wife went through it as much as I did. She re-defined the meaning of help and comfort.

When her inherent radar sensed I was teetering on the verge of depression and ready to flop down in a corner to brood and curse my bad luck, she stood resolutely in the way.

She rummaged through our collection of movie discs to divert my attention to the detective mysteries and action adventures she knew would capture me for two hours or so transporting me to a more upbeat frame of mind.

The Maltese Falcon, the French Connection, the Godfather trilogy, Rambo, Die Hard and Terminator passed the time for me through many a late afternoon and early evening.

By the time my chemo regimen concluded, my movie body count exceeded that of the French Revolution.

The knowledge of the disease you're carrying around never fully vanishes, though, and nights are often very, very long.

In the darkness, the ghosts, goblins and demons reappear, cruelly denying sleep and forcing one to stare at the glowing red numbers on the bedside clock as they change – 2:10 a.m., 2:11, 2:12 – until the hoped for exhaustion finally wins out.

With the completion of my final chemo session in the late summer of 1996, I experienced a sense of victory – hell, I was still alive and now at least I could watch college football game day Saturday without falling asleep shortly after the coin toss.

A larger celebration was in order, though, and in September, my wife and I flew to Europe. I'd never been out of the country while she'd visited there several times. We visited London, boarded the train for a trip beneath the English Channel to Paris and on to Brussels to visit my son who was living in the Belgian capital.

I've been cancer free for 26 years. I'm not cured in the traditional sense because the disease remains beyond a cure. I'm just free of it and that's good enough for me.

My mind occasionally drifts back to the beginning of my journey, usually brought on when standing to shave in front of the bathroom mirror in the morning and my eyes glance at the surgical scar running from my lower abdomen to the top of my stomach. It's faded a bit over the years, but it remains a reminder nonetheless.

In the years since my sidewalk collapse, my life has been enriched with our adoption of three orphans from China who've proudly become American citizens and who are equally as proud of their Asian heritage.

I've shared my health history with them from time to time, holding back some details, and all three understand.

When Congressman Payne spoke of his father's illness and death, I could relate to some degree with what he endured and how he dealt with it.

His desire to spare others from the physical pain and the mental anguish inflicted on patients and families by an incurable illness is in the highest degree of public service.

So, Congressman, we may occupy different political parties and we'll likely never agree totally – but hopefully respectfully – on the pressing issues of the nation and world in such tumultuous times, but the thousands like me who have heard or will hear a physician utter "You have cancer," are indebted to you.

I'm a cancer survivor, and politics aside, standing shoulder to shoulder with you is the easiest call I've ever made.

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