

Man turns cancer experience blog into book



by Jonathan Cribbs

Al Goggins refers to himself as an “accidental author.”

In a sense, it’s true. His first book, self-published in December, isn’t much like cancer victim memoirs you can find stacked aplenty in your local bookstore. It isn’t a carefully crafted narrative concerned with weighty literary pretensions, and it isn’t even the work of a man who sat down one day to write an honest-to-God book.

So It’s Serious; I Really Have Cancer is foremost about getting it on the page and showing the disease in real time. It is 200 pages about a Decatur man and his daily struggle with the disease, spilled unfiltered onto an Internet blog.

“I’m more interested in getting the book out because it’s more of a catharsis for me,” Goggins, 51, said inside his office this week. “I just want it out to see if it will help people.”

Though it’s a book now – available soon at major online book retailers such as amazon.com – it started in 2006 with a simple online posting that opens the book.

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Well, there is no more guessing. No more testing; we know for certain that I have cancer!

Goggins, who runs Audio-Visual Cooperative in Decatur, had suffered jaw pain for more than a year at that point. He didn’t have health insurance, and after several unhelpful doctor visits, the pain had not subsided. He couldn’t open his mouth enough to fit a fork in, and he was taking up to 16 ibuprofen pills each day to fight the pain.

He eventually ended up in Grady Memo-

rial Hospital in October 2006. A tumor starting at the base of his tongue had wrapped around his cheek just past his nose, constricting his jaw muscles, essentially clamping his mouth shut.

Was it cancerous?

“You try to hold out hope that everything is going to be fine,” Goggins said.

Of course it was cancerous.

Goggins walked into Grady for what was supposed to be a simple biopsy, and he woke up with a tracheotomy tube in his neck after the biopsy unexpectedly caused excessive bleeding. Goggins said he was in jeopardy of choking to death. Doctors found cancer in his neck and head, and because they couldn’t remove the tumor, Goggins had six to eight weeks of heavy radiation for which to prepare.

The diagnosis shocked Goggins and his wife, **Angela**.

“You don’t think,” she said. “You’re kind of numb.”

So It’s Serious; I Really Have Cancer covers everything that followed. Unable to speak for weeks at a time, Goggins wanted friends and family to know what he was going through, but he also wanted to understand himself. He started the blog with a simple, sarcastic, conversational tone with headings like, “So Who’s Going to Clean This Hole in My Neck?” or “Like I Need Another Place to Leak,” which chronicled the insertion of a feeding tube into his stomach after he found it difficult to swallow. Comments on the blog from friends and family are also kept intact.

He said blogging helped him deal with the weight of the disease. His wife said she still has difficulty talking about the year or so it took Goggins to fight cancer. She remembers a late fall night when she couldn’t slip the tracheotomy tube back into Goggins’ neck, so she drove him to the emergency

room. A doctor who was called in to treat him seemed irritated to be there, and she remembers listening in horror as the doctor cut into his neck to ease the tube back in – without anesthesia.

“Hearing him, that was the most overwhelming for me,” she said.

She remembers not being able to talk to him, not knowing how he felt, what he needed.

“You want to make things better. I wanted him to feel better,” she said. “I wanted him to feel OK, and there wasn’t anything I could do to make him feel OK.”

He lost 55 pounds, shriveling to an emaciated 145 pounds. For a time, he couldn’t consume anything but Gatorade; he simply threw up solid foods.

Meanwhile, support poured in. Friends and family read the blog. Some requested that he write more and wondered when he didn’t update the site regularly. One of them was **Patricia Koutouzis**, 60, of Marietta. She is a coordinator at WellStar Health Systems and knew Goggins because he produced conference videos for the company. Early on, when the tumor had been detected, Goggins had delayed a medical procedure so he could keep his commitment to shoot a WellStar conference, she said.

She read his blog frequently.

“He really made you feel a part of it. I think throughout the whole book there was always a sense of hope,” Koutouzis said. “No matter what, he was going to get through it. And I think that’s important. I think that if anyone’s facing anything like that, and they read his book, I think that it would give them hope. And attitude is important.”

The blog uplifted Goggins in ways he didn’t expect.

“I did not know or understand any impact I had had on anyone else’s life,” he said. “I was just amazed I had done something in life to warrant that kind of love and support.”

Goggins recovered in the spring 2007. Doctors aren’t entirely sure how he got cancer. One told him it was likely because he began smoking cigars frequently in 2003, but others have said that was too recent to cause full-blown cancer.

The book was printed by Xlibris, a publishing house in Philadelphia. For about \$3,000, the company edited his manuscript, printed the book and promoted it, Goggins said. So far, he said, he’s sold about 20 books, mostly to family and friends, but if the book becomes more popular, he wants to set up a foundation for other persons with cancer and use medical organizations to distribute the book in medical centers and hospitals.

He said he knew he wanted to turn the blog into a book when he looked at cancer pamphlets at the hospital, none of which included testimony from actual victims. If someone could read his story, honest and unfiltered, Goggins explained, they may be more likely to approach their own illness positively and with hope.

“Looking back on it, I wouldn’t change a thing,” he said.