

# Speaking Out About ORAL CANCER

Local Survivor Jim Brewer Shares His Story



Sandra and Jim Brewer

*What do you know about oral cancer?*

If you're like most people, your answer is probably "not much." According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, even though there are 43,250 new cases of oral cancer in the U.S. every year, oral cancer awareness in the American public is low. In light of this fact, and to coincide with this issue's special section on Oral Health, we asked local oral cancer survivor **Jim Brewer** if he would be willing to tell us about his personal battle with the disease. What emerged was a story of hardship, perseverance, teamwork, and strength in the midst of obstacles. Our hope is that it will inspire you to learn more about the disease – and consider joining Jim and many other advocates in our area in raising awareness for this disease.

"My wife Sandra and I married in July of 2003. A few months later, as we were in the midst of blending our families together during the holidays, our lives took a dramatic turn. I noticed that I had a sore on my tongue that wasn't healing, and mentioned it to Sandra. She made an appointment for me with Dr. Jack Greer immediately after the holidays. Little did I know then that Jack would become an important part of my life moving forward.

At my appointment, Jack took a biopsy of the sore, and within a few days, we learned it was squamous cell carcinoma. I became one of the estimated 43,250 people who are diagnosed with some form of oral cancer each year.

On February 1 of 2004, Jack, with the assistance of plastic surgeon Dr. Woody Kennedy, performed a partial glossectomy (removal of tongue

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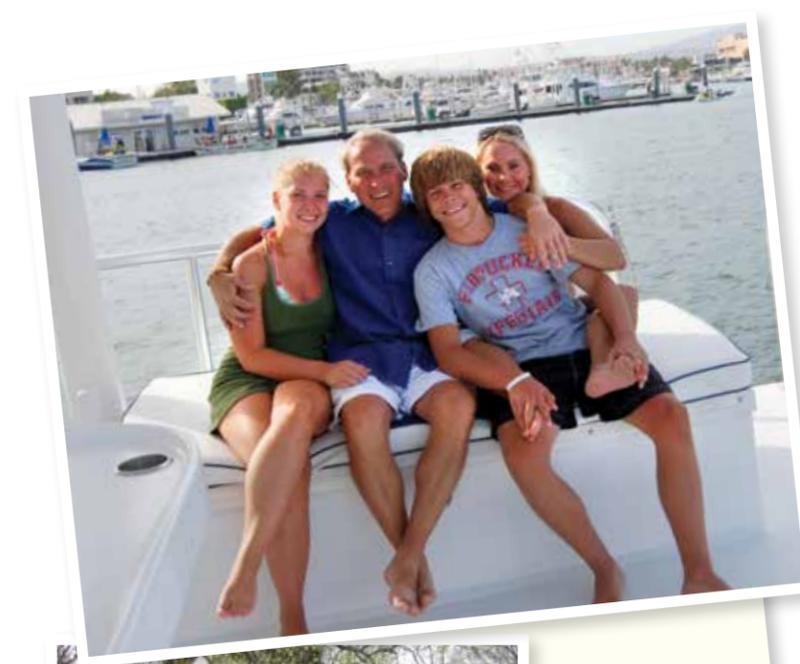
tissue) using my right forearm skin to replace the portion of my tongue that was removed. Lymph nodes in my neck area were also removed during the surgery. I spent a total of 11 days in the hospital. Shortly after that, I started daily radiation treatments for seven weeks.

I lost nearly 50 pounds as eating became increasingly difficult. Over time, I went from monthly visits with Jack to quarterly visits. He had told Sandra and me that

it would take a couple of years before I got back to feeling normal. Up until this time in my life, I had rarely gotten sick, so I thought, "Surely it can't take that long." It turns out that it did.

As time went on, though, I thought I had made it. I was playing golf, my speech had improved, and eating had become a lot easier. Then four-and-a-half years later, I felt something was wrong again. I began having trouble moving my tongue, and eating became a bit frustrating. I called Jack and explained that my tongue felt different. Sure enough, a scan showed that the cancer had returned. By this time, I had read many articles about oral cancer, and the fear of being one of the 50% that don't survive five years or more got into my head.

That August, I checked into Memorial Hospital to have the tumor removed. Jack started the procedure, then stopped. He met with Sandra in

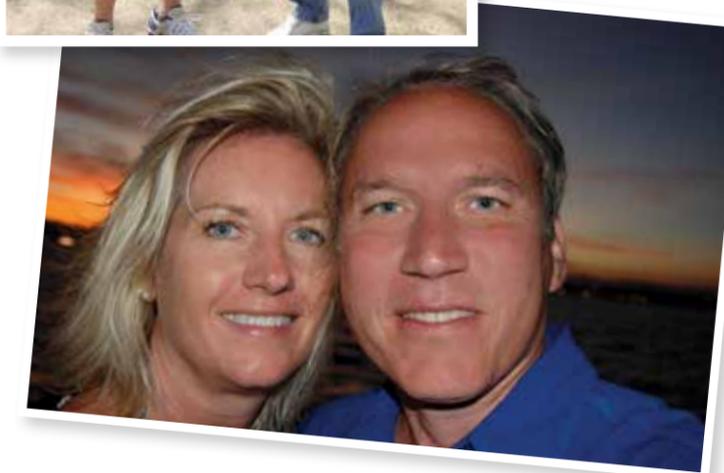


(above) Jim with his three kids, Carly, James, and Danielle



(left) Dr. Jack Greer and Jim at the 1st Annual Oral Cancer Walk in Chattanooga

(below) Sandra and Jim



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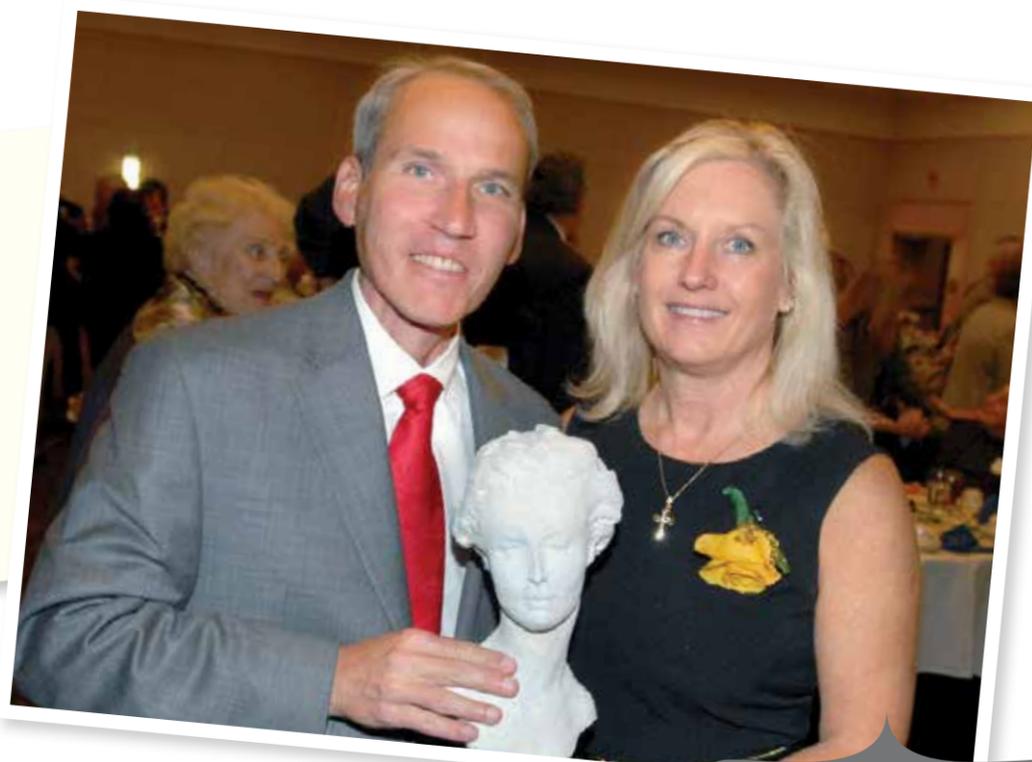


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*Jim and Sandra at the 2011 National Philanthropy Day Luncheon, where Brewer Media was recognized as the "2011 Corporate Philanthropist of the Year" by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Southeast TN Chapter*



the waiting room and explained that it was a lot worse than he initially thought – it would be better to go to MD Anderson in Houston, he said. He got us an appointment immediately, and off we went.

When we arrived, Hurricane Ike had just hit Texas and much of Houston was without power. There was damage everywhere. The next few days seemed surreal. I could tell that my tongue had gotten worse, and a CT scan and PET scan showed the cancer was about three centimeters. We were told Dr. Randal Weber, the Professor and Chair of the Head and Neck Surgery Center at the hospital, was going to be my surgeon. In a pleasant turn of events, we discovered he was familiar with Chattanooga – he shared that he was from East Ridge and a graduate of the University of Tennessee.

Sandra and I sat and listened as Dr. Weber explained that I was going to need at least half of my tongue removed, potentially all of it. I really had no choice if I wanted to live, he said. He also recommended that I have an additional 30 radiation treatments along with weekly chemo sessions. We flew

home that afternoon to prepare for a three-month stay in Houston.

We got back, packed, got our affairs in order, and then returned to Houston. The surgery took 11 hours, and just over half of my tongue was removed to get clear margins around the tumor. I spent nine days at the hospital before moving into a condo that we had rented for our stay. About three weeks later, I started my second round of radiation and chemo treatments. Shortly after New Year's Day, I rang the bell for my last treatment and then returned to Chattanooga.

There were a few complications as a result of the additional radiation. At one point I had minor surgery to remove some tissue and the radiated area wouldn't heal, so Dr. Greer set me up for 30 hyperbaric oxygen treatments. Later, the extensive radiation treatment caused some issues with my neck, so in 2011 I had stents inserted in both carotid arteries. But finally, things seemed to be getting back to normal.

I was approaching 10 years of survivorship when I started having trouble with some of my teeth becoming loose and having extensive bleeding from my mouth.

### LEARN MORE ABOUT ORAL CANCER

The local chapter of The Oral Cancer Foundation offers several opportunities to connect throughout the year, including:

\* A Local Support Group that meets the first Monday of the month at Memorial Hospital at 4pm.

\* The annual Walk for Awareness held every spring. This year's Walk for Oral Cancer in Chattanooga raised over \$30,000.

For more info on this disease, as well as more ways to connect, visit online at [oral-cancer.org](http://oral-cancer.org).

“It takes a team to get through cancer, and my team has been incredible.”

We set up an appointment with my dentist, Dr. Charles Holt, who had been following my progress throughout the entire time. He saw that a portion of my jawbone had become exposed, so I revisited Jack and then returned to Houston and Dr. Weber. The diagnosis was osteoradionecrosis (ORN) – bone death. My lower jawbone had died as a result of the radiation, and Dr. Weber felt the only course of action was to have a fibula flap operation in which the fibula in my leg would be used to replace my jaw.

This past January, I underwent a 10-hour operation and the results were amazing. My jaw had been replaced without complications and no disfiguration, and three weeks later, I was back at work. I still have the process of dental implants to deal with, but I feel like I'm back on track and hopefully by this fall I'll be able to chew food again.

Throughout all of this, my friend Dr. Jack Greer and his staff have been right there with me every step of the way. Sandra and my children, friends, and parents have been a terrific support group. It takes a team to get through cancer, and my team has been incredible.”

*-Jim Brewer, II*

Jim Brewer, II is the President of Brewer Media Group, a local multimedia provider of news, information, and entertainment. Brewer Media owns and operates five radio stations, Power 94, Groove 93, ESPN Radio 105.1, Cat Country 95.3 and Hippie Radio 106.9, in Chattanooga along with the Chattanooga Pulse Newspaper and several websites including ChattanoogaHasCars.com.



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