

Grandpa is going on tour!

Dealing with cancer is hard. You go through all kinds of treatments, surgeries, visits to doctors, specialists, maybe speech therapy and physical therapy. It is also hard on your family and friends to watch you undergo this.

The hard part for me was the radiation, 35 treatments, every day for 7 weeks. One hour drive to and one hour drive from the hospital. Sitting in the waiting room, then going on the table, getting a mask over your head that is strapped tight. It scared the hell out of me. BUT, I got through it and finished all the treatments. My mask was made of plastic and I never had the chance to take it home with me. Never even thought about it.

Nowadays the masks are made of some kind of thermal plastic with little holes in it, they shape it around your face, neck and head. Not that it makes it feel better being strapped at the table though, you have the prints in your skin after. The 'good' part is that after you are done with radiation, you get to keep it.

And that is where my story starts. I visited the International Head and Neck cancer conference in Brighton this year. Walking in the room where the event was I noticed different masks. One was a Lion, there was King Tut, a totally green one and so many more. I was amazed by it. At first I did not realize what they were until it dawned on it they were radiation masks. All decorated in a beautiful form of art.

The one that stood out for me was a mask covered with blue and white pieces of paper. I could feel it had to have a special story because it was so different from all the other masks in the room. I was right, it was and it still brings tears in my eyes.

It turned out the masks belonged to a man who battled head and neck cancer. He underwent radiation but sadly lost his life. After he passed away his family kept his mask under the stairs and never thought about it. Some time later they heard about a special program The Mask Art Program. They decided to take the Mask from under the stairs and planned a weekend to decorate it with the whole family. They all gathered around the table and the stories about their beloved Husband, Father and Grandfather all came up.

They decided to decorate his mask in PNE colours, Preston North End Football Club, his beloved Football team. The team he used to go as a life time season ticket holder. The family worked on the mask over the following weekends, decorated it in the blue and white colours of PNE while telling each other stories, remembering the good times and honour the life of this beloved man. It was not just a project, it bonded the family.

The result of the mask is amazing but the story behind it even more. And what really hit me was that this mask is going all over the UK and maybe, one day, goes around the World. Grandpa is going on Tour. The Mask tells it's story and he will never be forgotten. His memory and legacy will always be there for as long as the Mask is there thanks to his beloved family and their decision to decorate it and donate it to the art project. I can see how they all worked on it, sitting around the table, laughing, crying, bonding. Their loved one might be out of sight, but he lives in their hearts forever.

Stories like this touch me deeply and that is why I decided to write this article. As a tribute to Grandpa Preston and all the others that we've lost. To show the world that they are gone but not forgotten. That they still have a story to tell even after they passed away. I hope this inspires other families to work on projects like the Mask Art Project or maybe something else.

Thank you Preston Family, for the story behind the Mask

Marianne Kooijman



The Swallows

Head & Neck Cancer Support Group
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