

The Marrow in Me

By Kevin Walsh

CHAPTER ONE: AN ODD GOLF BALL

To any other golfer on the range of Ko'olau Golf Club that one odd golf ball in a basket of identicals would have been kicked aside. It was old—maybe 20 or 30 years old. It was discolored, scuffed up and had a different dimple pattern. But *something* about that ball that called out to Chris Pablo. He didn't know why but he couldn't bring himself to hit it.

The view surrounding the golf course was stunning. On the mauka side the majestic and mossy green Koolaus rose into the sky. The mountains caught the clouds which drifted across the sky with the help of the trade winds. With nowhere to go the clouds dumped rain which bounced off the mountains as mist. Sprinkle the mist with brilliant Hawaiian sunshine and you had the most gorgeous rainbows you'd ever want to see.

On the makai side, the Pacific Ocean had its collage of colors too. For about as far as Tiger Woods could hit a drive, the water off the windward side of Oahu looked white. It was the function of the sun shining through the clear shallow water and reflecting off the white sand below. Farther out where the jet skiers and surfers romped, the water turned aqua green. Past that the water got deeper and bluer. The deeper it got, the bluer it became. It was better than a postcard.

Who could have known paradise like this was the backdrop of a living hell for a 45-year old married father of two children? Chris Pablo looked the part of someone living the good life. He was six feet tall, slender, with brown hair, chocolate eyes and a decent smattering of freckles on his handsome face. His age didn't mirror his body. He ate right and was probably in better shape than most 25-year olds, putting in impressive gym workouts that included serious weight lifting and cardio.

Chris worked as a lobbyist for Kaiser Permanente, a major medical provider in Honolulu. He put in long hours at the office, successfully persuading island senators and

house members to look kindly on the medical industry with legislation and funding. Even with a crazy schedule like his, Chris always had time for his beautiful wife, Sandy; and two good looking sons, six-year-old Nate and three-year-old Zack. When he wasn't at work, or at home, Chris spent time with friends strolling the Bermuda grass fairways of Oahu's golf courses.

To anyone else Chris's schedule and lifestyle would have been exhausting. He got by because he had a zest for life and an abundant well of energy—obvious byproducts of his physical fitness. Not that anyone else would have noticed, but Chris hadn't felt well for weeks. The energy he could always count on was in steady decline. So he went to the doctor looking for reassurance that he had some kind of minor ailment that would eventually be cleared up with rest and medicine. He went in with hope and came out with cancer.

Three weeks after being diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia, Chris went to the driving range, if for nothing else, to get away from the chronic worry that came with such a thing. All types of leukemia can kill, and CML is about the worst you can have. Cancer cells develop in the bone marrow and can travel in the blood to the spleen and other organs. At the very least Chris was looking at serious chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. Whatever the case, it was going to be a long, tough road ahead. And even with all the right treatment there was no guarantee he would live.

Hitting golf balls was good therapy. It was physical without being physically taxing, and it took a certain amount of mental focus, which was good for Chris because it took his mind off his health problems. He was about halfway through the basket when he saw that odd one in the mix. Something about it compelled him to take a closer look. He bent down, plucked it out and turned it on its side. Printed on the side of the ball was an inspirational message. When he saw the words *beat leukemia* looking back at him he got the chills. That's really saying something because it's never cold in Hawaii.

Almost immediately Chris's lips quivered, his eyes watered and his heart screamed out in joy. For him it was clear. The *beat leukemia* golf ball was a sign that he would be cured. He would see his young boys become men and he would grow old and walk with his wife on the beautiful beaches of Hawaii. He felt that sense of goodness, that spirit of hope all the way down to his bones—where the marrow lives. Few people

and certainly not the other golfers on the range could have known what finding that ball meant to Chris Pablo. In someone else's basket the ball and words would have meant nothing. In Chris's basket it meant *everything*. How it got there, God only knows. He put the ball in his pocket and went home.

The diagnosis of CML was bad luck for sure. Even with his lucky discovery, a golf ball wasn't going to cure his leukemia. Chris had a lot of work to do and he would probably need more miracles in addition to the one in his pocket. His best hope for survival was a bone marrow transplant. No luck finding a match within his family, so he would have to find a match from someone on the outside. That would take a lot of luck too.

Chris was Filipino and minorities are vastly underrepresented in bone marrow registries. Unlike a simple blood transfusion, a bone marrow transplant involves a much more specific match of tissue markers that falls almost exclusively along racial and ethnic lines. If you get sick, the chance of you finding a match outside your racial and ethnic identity is not nearly as good as finding it within. But there have been exceptions. Later I would meet a pretty lady who was the exception and, as luck would have it, was a friend of Chris Pablo. Something else; in a place like Hawaii so many people are of mixed race and ethnicity. It wasn't uncommon to have someone who was a quarter Japanese, a quarter Filipino, a quarter Chinese and a quarter white. Now imagine they got sick and needed a bone marrow transplant. There are not a lot of potential donors registered who are of that same racial medley. The same thing happened to baseball Hall of Famer Rod Carew's daughter.

The first place to look for a bone marrow match is within your family and usually from a sibling. Even then there's only a 25 percent chance you'll find it. If there's no match in the family you look on the outside. To this point international registries showed no match for Chris Pablo anywhere in the world. But considering his lucky find with the golf ball, he thought luck would strike again. First he would need a partner who had access to a lot of people, a media friend perhaps, who could get the word out that Chris needed help. Despite the odds the concept was simple. Somewhere in the world there *might* be a match for Chris. He needed a lot people to sign up at registration drives and hopefully one in the bunch would match him. Applying the concept wasn't so easy.

Culturally speaking, a haole boy from Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania hardly seemed like a likely media partner for an islander like Chris. He was brown, I was white. I was Catholic, he was Episcopalian. He was thin, and don't we wish we all were? Chris was kamaaina—of the land. I was raised in the white bread Philadelphia suburbs. But even if our lives were worlds apart, geography and culture wouldn't get in our way. It would just take a little time for the course of my life and livelihood to unfold before Chris and I hooked up.

Before TV there was radio. I'd only been out of college for ten months and I was reading crop reports on the radio for a small AM radio station in Frankfort, Indiana. Being something of a big city kid I knew absolutely *nothing* about farming. But with a little help from those in the "agricultural know" I learned how to read the Associated Press wire copy in the farmer's language. "Corn futures up a penny and-a-half, soybeans..." On and on it went.

When I wasn't delivering the ag report, we did small town news at WILO Country. Frankfort is an hour north of Indianapolis and an hour southeast of my alma mater, Purdue University in West Lafayette. The people in Frankfort are very nice, solid Midwesterners. But there's not much to do there. Teenagers pile into cars and cruise. They drive a loop from the courthouse, to the strip, past Stock's Laundromat and turn around in the Marsh grocery store parking lot. They do it for hours, honking their horns and occasionally stopping to talk.

The only cruising I did was back and forth to the radio station. I buried myself in my work. Other than talking on the radio I didn't have anyone else to talk to. The hours were long, the pay sucked and the early morning hours were murder. It was a start. Nobody would hire me on TV.

For fun I did overnight ride-a-longs with the Frankfort Police Department. Part of my reporting duties included going to the police department every morning to read the arrest reports. The reports were typed on four by six cards. I noticed the stack was a lot thicker on Monday mornings. I asked the clerk if I could talk to the chief about that.

Seconds later a large man walked out of an office. "Can I help you?" Jim Skinner asked.

“Are you the chief?” I asked hardly believing someone who looked so young could have such an important position.

“Yeah,” Chief Skinner shrugged, acknowledging that most people couldn’t believe it either.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Thirty.”

Jim Skinner took over when the previous chief, Harold Woodruff, retired and became Mayor of Frankfort. Even if Chief Skinner looked 20 years too young to be the top cop, he still looked like a cop. He was a big boy with a standard police officer’s mustache, about 6’3”, 6’4” and somewhere in the neighborhood of 240 pounds.

“Chief I come in here on Mondays and I just can’t believe how thick the stack of arrests is. I don’t get it. The town seems very quiet to me, but then again I go to bed early. What’s going on?”

“Oh it gets a little crazy when the sun goes down and the alcohol starts kicking in. You should come along and see it for yourself sometime,” he told me.

So that’s when I started rolling overnights with the cops. I rode with the mayor’s son, Gary, a few times. Gary Woodruff was about 30 years old and he was a cop’s cop. We would drive down the street and he’d see potential trouble before it happened.

“Okay watch this Kevin. See that guy walking? He saw us and that’s why he turned down that street. He’s going to loop back around as soon as he sees us turn the corner. What he doesn’t know is I’m gonna make another right turn, drive back along a parallel street and make my way back to where we first saw him.”

Sure enough Officer Woodruff was right. The guy seemed annoyed that were on to him. Woodruff concluded if the young man was really up to no good he would have ran. So we simply drove by slowly giving him “the look”, a subtle message that tonight was not the night to be a troublemaker. And we did the same thing with others, occasionally stopping, but usually moving on.

We went on calls which were sometimes intense and other times hilarious.

Dispatcher: “Frankfort units, a report of a naked man standing outside of an apartment complex making threats to his girlfriend.”

“Oh I just gotta see this,” Gary said when the call came across the police radio.

It was a cold winter morning just after midnight and temperatures were in the single digits. We could only imagine what awaited us. Gary floored the Ford Crown Victoria. We hit triple digits on the speedometer in no time and within a minute and-a-half we were out of town and in the countryside. Still we were late. By the time we got there the naked guy was inside.

Gary knocked on the door with his flashlight.

“Tommy, c’mon out, we want to talk to you,” he said loudly.

“*Oh no you don’t.* I’m not coming out. I’m not *stupid.* If I come out you mother f...rs will arrest me just like you always do,” Tommy responded.

“No we won’t,” Officer Woodruff said. “Not if you didn’t do anything wrong. C’mon out Tommy.”

“Nope not doin’ it. You guys do it to me *every* time. You tell me to come out for a talk and then you arrest me and take me to jail. I’m not fallin’ for it,” Tommy said wickedly.

“Well at least come to the window so I can see that you’re okay,” Officer Woodruff said.

To that Tommy was agreeable. We heard his feet shuffle away from the door and over toward the window. He pulled the curtain back and sure enough he was in the buff like the dispatcher said he would be, and he wasn’t happy about having an audience.

“Who the f..k is that co.. sucker?” he screamed pointing at me.

By now backup had arrived and the other cops were doubled over in laughter. As the reporter tagalong I had turned into a joke. I thought it was funny too, but I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate for me to laugh. Tommy wouldn’t let up.

“*Who the f..k is that co.. sucker?!*” he demanded to know.

“He’s just a friend,” Gary Woodruff told him. “Calm down Tommy. He’s not going to bother you.”

“He is bothering me! Tell that co.. sucker to get the f..k out of here!”

Eventually I walked around the corner and the boys went in and got him. Later that night we stopped by the Clinton County jail to take care of some paperwork. As I walked by the steel door of a holding cell I heard a loud BANG on the reinforced glass window. Reflexively I ducked. Someone in the lockup banged his fist on the window

and gave me the most chilling look I've seen since Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. It was Tommy and he scared me. *I almost pissed my pants*. The jailors loved it!

Take my word for it when I say the early stages of a media career are not glamorous. There's plenty of heartbreak and rejection to go along with all the riff raff. I sent out close to 100 audition tapes to small media markets hoping to break into television. I got *one* phone call. I drove eight hours to the interview in tiny Alpena, Michigan on the shores of Lake Huron in northeastern part of the state. The drive was so far out in the sticks I was wondering if people hunted for sustenance. Then out of nowhere the little town of 11,000 appeared. From what I could tell it was a hardworking, old mill town with brutally, cold winters.

Small markets are proving grounds. If you're good you'll move up. If you're talking market sizes north of 200, you're probably not going to see many people with the natural ability to make it to the network level. Alpena is market 208 out of 210 television markets in America. I thought the job was mine. I couldn't miss. Well... I missed. The news director called and said I didn't get the job.

I was *crushed*. If I couldn't get a job in a place like Alpena, Michigan I wasn't sure I could work in television anywhere. I *thought* I had potential and a good future ahead of me, but I was beginning to wonder if all this rejection was telling me something I didn't want to hear. Maybe I just wasn't cut out for this line of work. I was depressed. So like any good Catholic, I prayed.

You don't find a lot of Catholics in media, at least not practicing ones. And even then, you might not know who they are because most Catholics don't advertise. I never did because I knew what I had and that was good enough for me. Plus there's always been a fair amount of Catholic bashing inside newsrooms and, well, who needs the headache?

When Catholics are really desperate they pray to St. Jude. He's the patron saint of hopeless causes; the miracle worker, the first cousin and best friend of Jesus. Obviously he has pull. I pull out my miniature ceramic statue of St. Jude and pray novenas when my life gets tough. He, as you will come to see, would play a recurrent role throughout my personal life and career.

Although we revere St. Jude at our home, my children are rough on him. My little girls lump him in with their Barbie Doll play and Jude takes his fair share of lumps. When his limbs break off I glue them back on. He's even lost his head a few times.

My relationship with St. Jude started just a few years earlier at the suggestion of a hospice worker who cared for my mother. My mom, Carole Walsh, had a malignant brain tumor. I took a semester off from college to help care for her. In her final two years she had two cranial surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. The cancer really beat her up physically, emotionally and to some extent spiritually.

The second surgery left her semi-paralyzed on her right side. Her right arm just hung there, sometimes getting tangled up in the hospital bed we had for her at home. The right side of her face and mouth drooped, making eating tough and her once perfect speech slurred. One of my most painful memories was our last family dinner together. We had seafood. The bay scallops kept falling out of her mouth and the brown sauce smeared on her cheeks. My mom was always one of the neatest and well-mannered eaters I'd ever seen. The messiness robbed her of her dignity, so I kept wiping her face clean. Finally she'd had enough and broke down in tears, "*What are you so embarrassed you can't stand to see the sight of me being messy?*" she asked.

Her question killed me because part of it was true. I was embarrassed, but I didn't want her to be embarrassed too. That's why I took a napkin to her face. Prior to our last supper my mom never would have allowed herself to continue eating with food on her face. That's when *I knew*.

If there's anything tougher than watching your mom wither away I don't know what it is. Mom is the one who carried you, gave birth to you and the one who comforted you. When you're sick you don't want your dad, you want your *mom*. Losing her was a loss on so many levels. All along I prayed to St. Jude; if not for cure, then for peace and strength. We didn't get a cure, but I got plenty of peace and strength and I know mom did too.

Before she died I had a lot of talks with my Mom about family and God.

"Do you think Dad will remarry after I die?" she asked.

"I don't know Mom. I haven't asked him and I don't think he's gone there in his head yet," I told her.

“Do you think I’ll go to heaven?”

“Definitely, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect Mom. I don’t think you have to be perfect to get in.”

“Sometimes I have doubts about God and whether there is a heaven. Doesn’t that mean I won’t go to heaven?” she asked.

“I don’t think so. I think we all have doubts about God and heaven from time to time. I do. I think if you want to believe it and *try* to believe it in your heart of hearts, that’s good enough for God. So even if you have some doubts, your *desire* to believe is what makes the difference in his eyes,” I told her.

“Are you guys gonna be alright without me? What about Michael?” she asked.

My younger brother Michael was just 14 at the time. He never had the chance to experience my mother like me and my older brother Chris did. Even before my mother was diagnosed two years earlier, we believe she’d been sick long before and just wasn’t herself for some time. Soon she’d be gone and Mike wouldn’t have someone to help him get ready for the prom, cook him chicken soup when he was sick, and to love him as only a mother could.

“He’ll be fine. He’s a good kid, very mature for his age. He’ll grow up and make us all proud,” I told her.

“And Chris?” she asked.

“He’s an adult. He can handle it.”

“What about you?”

“Mom I’m 21. I’m an adult. I’ll be alright.”

“Are you going to miss me?”

“Of course I’ll miss you Mom.”

And with that she cried with an intensity that I’ve never seen before and hope never to see again. It was a full body cry, her head and upper torso stuck in a rocking motion back and forth. She was so spent from the release that she didn’t have the strength to wipe herself, even with her good hand. I would lose my mom to cancer just a couple of weeks later at the age of 51, one day after my parent’s wedding anniversary.

Life was bad during my mom's illness, but I didn't realize how bad it was until I really put some time and distance between it. Getting through it took more strength than I had on my own. The extra help came from faith and prayer. I believe the biggest lift came from St. Jude.

There was another living saint in my life, my wife Jean Gnap. She consoled me when I lost my mom and was always just a phone call away when I would whine about the slow progress in my career and being stuck in radio. She assured me that I was a good broadcaster and that my time to shine on TV would come. Even if my career didn't take off she said she'd love me just the same.

Then one day the break I had been waiting *so* long for appeared to present itself. "Hey Kev, are you still looking for a job in TV?" asked Jeff Marchesseault, my radio pal at Y-lo Country in Frankfort.

"Yeah, why?" I asked him.

"Well I think I got a job in Guam, and the news director says they need one more. Want me to tell him about you?"

"*Where* is Guam?" I asked.

"It's out in the Western Pacific near the Philippines," Jeff said.

I was still getting over my Alpena, Michigan rejection when I took out a globe. I kept turning it and turning it looking for a land mass. I couldn't find it. Eventually I found a dot with the text **Guam** next to it. The dot told me it was small. The endless turning of the globe told me it was at the edge of the earth. And there was something else about Guam that made it even more unnerving—*snakes!*

From the limited number of articles I could find on Guam, all of them talked about an abundance of brown tree snakes that bordered on the apocalyptic. Snakes weren't falling out of the sky, but they were slithering down power lines and coming up through toilets! *Lovely*. And I thought I was out of my element in the cornfields of Indiana.

After a couple of days Jeff needed an answer.

"Uh, why not? Tell 'em I'm interested," I told Jeff, not knowing this really was the lucky break I needed and never imagining what would later become of my life.

I got the job. Before setting off on the cross-world journey my future in-laws in suburban Chicago threw a sendoff party for me and Jean. Jean came from a large, close knit family. Nobody in her family ever moved away. The Gnaps liked me, but they didn't like the fact that I would be taking their girl so far away. Nobody in the family knew a thing about Guam. And, as fate would have it, on the day of our party the front page of The Chicago Tribune had a headline that read: **Guam: The Land of Ten Million Tree Snakes.** I saw the words when I fetched the paper from the end of the driveway early in the morning. I knew it would be trouble when visiting family arrived later in the day.

“Ooooh my Gaaad! successive aunts said in their vowel challenged Chi-caw’-goh accents. Did you see the paper today about Guam? Jean’s going to a place where there are all these snakes! Ooooh my Gaaad!”

It wasn't the encouragement we were hoping for, but we were going just the same. Because Guam Cable TV was paying my fare, I had to fly its route. Jean flew on her own dime and a few hours behind me. I had my suitcase, my golf clubs and a sense of adventure. I started in Chicago with stops in Minneapolis and Honolulu. The layover in Hawaii was brief, but long enough to climb to the top of the parking garage where I had a good look at downtown Honolulu. It was my first time in Hawaii and something inside told me it wouldn't be my last. What I couldn't possibly know at the time was the Hawaiian Islands would later make a home for me. But the path to Hawaii and future acts of charity went through the Marianas Islands and Guam.

The last leg of the long journey to Guam was an eight hour flight from Honolulu to Agana. The first thing I noticed about the people getting on board the flight was their clothes. It was truly island wear with flowered prints, untucked aloha shirts and muumuu dresses. Then I noticed color. Not the color of their clothes, the color of their skin. Aside from the flight crew I was the only white person on board. That was a first. I'd never been the lone minority anywhere. I didn't just see the difference, I could *feel* it.

Until then, the only culture I'd ever known was what I learned in school and read about in books and magazines. It's one thing to read about culture, another thing to live it. I was nervous, but excited about the possibilities. Then I looked down at the passenger footwear. I had just left the Midwest in the dead of winter so my feet were

covered up. Most everyone had on sandals. Some didn't wear shoes at all. And it wasn't because they took them off—*they didn't own shoes*.

The long flight over the Pacific gave me plenty of time to think. As darkness fell some of my thoughts turned as dark as the night sky. About six, or seven hours into it, it really hit me that I couldn't undo this even if I wanted to. I was locked in a plane 35,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean, seven thousand miles away from home. I didn't have enough money to buy a return ticket if the place turned out to be a dive. I was stuck. I had to make it work. Most of my life I lived with the comfort of knowing I could always go home to my parents if things got bad. This time that option was out.

The engines on the Northwest DC-10 slowed and the plane started to descend from the dark sky. People in the cabin started to stir. Flight attendants came through to pick up drink cups and the captain came on the intercom with word that we would be landing soon. I looked out the window and saw nothing for a good 15 minutes of the descent. I thought I might see the lights of a ship at sea, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing. I wasn't sure there was land this far out in the ocean to land on. Then on final approach I saw lights flickering between the cloud cover. As we got closer the lights became colorful. It would be Christmas in a couple of days and I had almost forgotten it was the holiday season. I wasn't sure what Christmas would like in such a faraway land, but from the sky it looked almost like it did back home. That was comforting.

We landed at A.B. Won Pat Airport, which shared runway space with Naval Air Station Guam. I could tell it was a warm, humid night by feeling the temperature rise in the cabin as dew formed on the windows. I was really looking forward to some warm weather after what had been a cold start to the winter in the Midwest. But whatever warm thoughts I had about the weather and good feelings about a fresh start in a faraway land all but disappeared as soon as I set foot in the terminal.

The airport was dimly lit and smelled of mold. I thought there would be families waiting for loved ones with smiles and flowers—just like Hawaii. There was hardly anybody. My fellow passengers got off the plane and trekked through the terminal like they knew what they were doing and where they were going. Me? I was lost, sad and really hungry.

I thought I might be able to get something to eat at the food court. No food court here. There wasn't a restaurant or a vending machine to be found. As my stomach growled my heart and spirits sank. I thought Guam was supposed to be semi-modern, but it all seemed third world to me. And I couldn't imagine what my fiancée would think when she landed. Over and over I kept thinking what have I done? What have I done?

John Ryan, the assignment editor and investigative reporter for Guam Cable TV was waiting for me and picked me out of the crowd. That was pretty easy to do, one white guy finding another in a sea of brown people. We loaded my luggage into the back of his pickup truck and then it rained on my stuff. It was not a good start.

We went to the TV station to pick up a compact station vehicle that would be mine to drive for the week. The driver's side seat had a Glad trash bag draped over it. Once I started driving through the driving island rain I understood why the bag was there. The window leaked and the dripping water soaked my pants. It pissed me off. I was wet and it looked like I pissed my pants.

My hotel for the week wasn't much better than the car. There were dozens of lizards crawling on the stucco wall outside the hotel entrance and there was a cockroach the size of a Hot Wheels car zipping around inside my room. Jean was connecting through Narita, Japan and would be arriving in Guam within the hour, so I quickly unpacked and started making my way back to the airport. Aside from cursing the car's leaking window on the drive over, I rehearsed a speech in my head that I would deliver once I picked Jean up. She was all smiles when I saw her make it through customs. But when she saw me, her happy face turned to concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh honey. I don't know about this. This may be rougher than we thought it would be," I told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well let's put it this way. There are lizards everywhere. There's a huge roach in the hotel room. And there's a leak in the window of the car," I told her.

She took it a lot better than I thought she would, assuring me that she would stay as long as I did. And despite the early roach race and gecko gatherings the hotel, we eventually found more permanent digs with a nice little condo on East Agana Bay. It had

a wonderful view of surf and sand. No roaches here, just the occasional gecko, which we later learned was good luck.

Overall my luck was good in Guam. I learned TV from the ground up, advancing from the reporting ranks to the anchor desk within six months. Television aside we had a ball swimming and scuba diving with some of the most colorful fish in the world. The night life? You couldn't beat it. We went out and danced like we did when we were back in college. Everyone dances in Guam and they dance well. What's more, everyone knows how to dance with a partner. When was the last time you saw a 20-something guy who really knew how to dance with a girl?

I learned island culture the Chamorro way, going to festivals in the villages, loading up on tasty pork, chicken kelaguen, pancit, barbecue chicken and plenty of red rice. I even picked up a little of the Chamorro language which is about 80-percent Spanish and what's left of the original island tongue. We were strangers in a strange land, but after a few months the people of Guam began to accept us and treat us like family.

Going to church was especially comforting because 99.9 percent of Guam is Roman Catholic. Jean and I definitely stood out because we were the only white people at Mass. But Catholic Mass is pretty much the same wherever you go in the world provided that land's primary language is yours. And in Guam, English makes the world go round.

Guam wasn't forever. I mailed audition tapes out and had been in contact with news executives in Honolulu in early 1995. I was planning a trip back to the mainland and hoped to set up getting-to-know-you interviews during a long layover in Hawaii. Then, unexpectedly I got a phone call from Don Rockwell, the news director at KGMB TV in Honolulu. Apparently a reporter called a producer a sperm receptacle. It was certainly not a nice thing to say to a young woman, and considering that sexual harassment was *the* big politically incorrect taboo at the time—a comment like that couldn't go unpunished.

“We had an unfortunate incident here and had to let someone go. I was wondering do you still want to come here?” Don Rockwell asked me.

“Sure I’ll be there for the interview during my travels in a couple of weeks. I’m looking forward to meeting you,” I told him.

“No you don’t understand. We want you to *join* us,” he said.

“What do you mean? Are you hiring me without an interview?”

“Yes. We liked your tape and you obviously know TV. What do you say?” Don asked.

I cupped my hand over the phone, whispered the good news to my wife Jean and asked her if she wanted to move to Hawaii. She said yes.

“Yeah sure Don I’ll come,” I told him.

It really wasn’t much more than that. Don and I worked out a few details and within a couple of weeks I was on a plane for Honolulu.

My first assignment as a reporter at KGMB-9, the CBS affiliate, could have been a precursor to what good would come my way in Hawaii. It was a slow news day and the assignment desk sent me to a crafts show at Ala Moana Park with instructions to make something newsworthy out of it. I met a beautiful 40-something woman named Iwalani Tseu. Iwalani had the standard long, black island hair with a slight curl and skin lighter than most other local women. She was stunning. Her looks and her dancing ability made her one of the original hula dance girls in Waikiki entertainment shows. Twenty some years later, she still looked like she could perform if she wanted to. But she was a working mom now with a crafts business. She made kukui nut leis. Not only did she make them, she told interesting stories about them. According to Iwalani kukui nuts had special healing powers and were good luck.

“You’re new to the islands, yaah?” she asked in her island accent.

“Well new to these islands. I lived on an island before, Guam; so I’m familiar with island lifestyle,” I told her.

“Be good to the islands the islands will be good to you,” she told me while placing one of her expensive leis around my neck. “I’m gonna take care of you and be your hanai auntie now that you’re here. So you make sure you keep in touch with your Auntie Iwalani okay Kevin?”

A Hanai auntie or uncle is like your mom or dad's best friend. They're family without a blood connection. I don't know what it was, but I felt a strange connection with Iwalani, almost like we'd met before. Of course we hadn't. Aside from an airport layover more than a year ago I'd never been to Hawaii. And I was pretty sure Iwalani hadn't spent much time on the east coast. But later that night after my story with her hit the air, I got a call at the TV station.

"Kevin! It's Auntie Iwalani. You didn't tell me your last name was *Walsh*," she said with a sense of astonishment.

"I didn't? Well, it is. Why does it matter?" I asked.

"*I'm a Walsh too!*" she screamed.

"*What?*" I said incredulously.

"My father was an Australian sailor who came through the islands and met my mother. I'm hapa," she explained.

Hapa is short for hapa haole. In island parlance that's someone of mixed race. Iwalani's goodwill filled me with the Aloha Spirit. And once you have the Aloha Spirit in you, you are to share it with others. In true Hawaiian translation, *Aloha* means sharing the breath of life. I just needed some luck to find the right opportunity to share some Aloha of my own.

The alarm went off at 6:30 on a May morning in my tiny fourth floor apartment in a Nuuanu high rise. I reached over my wife on the spring day to turn the alarm off before slipping into the kitchen to make coffee. As the smell of the Lion Kona Coffee filled our place, I gazed out of our bay window. Straight ahead about a mile away was the Honolulu skyline. To the west, 747's from long trips across the Pacific Ocean made their final approach over Honolulu Harbor and into Honolulu International Airport. The rising sun lit up the lush green Waianae Mountains and the morning trade winds gave the branches of palm trees a lift. It was a beautiful morning. In Hawaii most mornings are.

I love watching planes. How aeronautical engineers can get something that big to take flight, stay in the air and land gracefully is a constant source of wonder for me. And it's not just that. I wonder who's on the plane? What do they look like? And where are they coming from? Were they senior citizens who saved their whole lives for a trip to the

most beautiful place on earth? Were they young lovers starting a long life together? Were they families who wanted to see the usual Hawaiiana stuff—luaus, volcanoes, leis and Da kine. I'm a people-watcher. I love to see people's passion for what usually is their trip of a lifetime.

Not on this day, but every now and then during my morning routine the phone would ring, and Brenda Salgado, the assignment editor at KGMB TV 9 News would tell me to get to the airport as fast as I could and get on one of those island-hopping smaller jets flown by Hawaiian, or Aloha Airlines. I'd be going to the outer islands to cover a news story. I had a booklet of tickets for both airlines that I could handwrite in the information and go straight to the gate. Seems hard to imagine with today's strict security, but back then that's the way we did it. When we got to the outer islands we'd rent a car, shoot our story, fly back and have our story on the air that night. I just loved Hawaiian mornings because they were always exciting to wake up to.

On that May morning over a bowl of Rice Krispies, with coffee and orange juice on the side, I listened to the most popular radio show in all of Hawaii to see if I could get an idea of what happened overnight and what might be the news of the day. If it mattered, Michael W. Perry and Da Coach, Larry Price, would be talking about it on KSSK, 92.3 FM. It didn't seem like they had much to say, so I wasn't really sure what my reporting assignment would be when I got to KGMB TV.

I took a last swig of coffee, brushed my teeth, kissed Jean goodbye and headed out the door. Waiting for me on the other side was the Honolulu Advertiser. I grabbed the newspaper and marched up the hill on Nuuanu Avenue, and plunked myself down on a bench next to the old Chinese cemeteries. Soon *The Bus* would turn off the Pali Highway and make its way down the hill. It wasn't just any bus, it was *The Bus*, part of America's best public bus system. Everyone took *The Bus*—the distinguished and the degenerates. The Number 21 cruised through Chinatown passing by the hookers and hobos still out after a long night. It made a left on South King Street, snaked through the Capital, past Honolulu Hale and the sea of strip clubs and hostess bars on Kapiolani Boulevard, before dropping me off at Piikoi Street, about a block away from work. During the 30 minute ride I read the newspaper, which on this morning didn't have much

more to add than what my friends Michael W. Perry and Larry Price talked about on the radio, so I wasn't exactly sure what my story for the day might be.

Most reporters at Channel 9 brought at least two or three story ideas to the morning editorial meeting. You made your pitch, got your assignment and off you went with a cameraman. If you didn't bring an idea with you, you were chastised and you got what was left. As an anchor I was given a little more slack. If I didn't have my story all set up and ready to go on my own, I'd be given one that was pretty easy to turn before I anchored the 5:00 news. On that spring day the assignment editors thought I would best handle the story of Chris Pablo, mostly because of my background as a lifelong golfer. I liked what little I knew about it. The *beat leukemia* stamping on the side of the golf ball was certainly attractive, but what I couldn't possibly know at the time was how covering Chris's story would give me a chance to share the Aloha Spirit and be witness and participant to life-changing and life-saving opportunities. And like the golf ball finding Chris, it was as if my own special finds somehow found me.

First though I had to find Chris. It wasn't all that hard because he was fairly well known in the media long before he was sick. He worked as a lobbyist for Kaiser Permanente, a major health provider. Whenever there was a medical story that needed news coverage, Chris was the go-to guy to find a doctor, or some other expert to talk about the subject. He knew how the media worked and he knew we loved stories with a hook. The *beat leukemia* golf ball was a helluva hook. It had all the elements you needed for a good TV news story—heartbreak, hope for a cure, inspiration and a family willing to give all access.

Chris had an agenda and wasn't shy about it. He needed publicity about his plight and plugs for the bone marrow registration drives he organized. Sure he had a lucky golf ball that he lugged around in his pocket to give him a lift, but the ball wasn't going to cure his cancer. If he didn't find a bone marrow match in a limited pool fairly quickly, he was going to die. I didn't want that to happen. So I picked up the phone and gave Chris a call.

It was the end of the school year and Chris was busier than even a healthy man should have been. He was putting in full days at the office, working several more hours when he got home arranging and promoting his bone marrow registration drives *and* he

was raising a young family. We agreed to meet on the last day of class at the prestigious Punahou School—the same place where Barack Obama and golfing great Michelle Wie went to school. I met Chris outside the pickup line where we waited for his six-year-old son Nate. I knew Chris by reputation, but I had never met him in person. When he climbed out of his car Chris looked tired, but he put a good face on it just the same. He needed to. He understood. He knew a lot of people would be seeing him for the first time and maybe the only time on TV, and he wanted them to believe he was well enough to make it through the grueling bone marrow transplant if he was lucky enough to find his match.

Nate Pablo came out and shared a warm embrace with his dad. He looked just like his dad in facial features and fatigue. The other kids seemed full of joy, clearly stoked about not having to come back to school for a couple of months. Nate looked tired, like he had heavy thoughts on his mind, which of course he did. He was not exactly pleased that he would have to share time with a TV crew, but he was polite, the product of parents who cared about manners and made sure their kids did too.

Later Sandy Pablo and their younger son Zack, who had some of the curliest boy hair I've ever seen, joined us on the infield of the school's track. It was the same track that hosted the old Superstars program on ABC's Wide World of Sports back in the 70's. We sat on the grass and chatted about hopes and fears for the future. I almost expected Sandy to be more of a cheerleader. Her candor and concern really brought home the gravity of what the Pablos faced as a family. She clearly saw the possibility of having to raise her children alone.

As I talked with Sandy I also kept an eye on Chris. He was intently focused on his sons, enjoying watching them play together with a newly purchased action figure. Nate took the lead as the eldest, twisting the action figure into different shapes and contortions before handing it over to Zack. Zack would do his own moldings and show it to his big brother for approval. Back and forth it went and there was never a tug-of-war. Chris had a look of satisfaction on his face that I guess was a reflection of how much he loved them and how proud he was that they got along so nicely.

As a future parent I wondered whether I would watch my children with a similar joy. Would I have boys, girls, or a combination? The Pablos play session made me

reflect on my own youth and relationships with my brothers. I loved my brothers Chris and Mike, but we *never* played with such peace. There would've been a war between us over that action figure. We would have twisted each other into some of the same positions Nate and Zack did with the toy. A part of me was jealous.

I knew at some point I would have to talk to the boys about their dad's illness. I wanted to choose my words carefully so I would get a mature response. As I often do I rehearsed a few lines in my head, trying to imagine how they would take it and how they would respond. I plunked myself down the grass so I would be on their level. I started with Nate. I asked him if he understood what his dad's illness was. He did, and he put it in a child's terms.

"He's not all better and needs his rest. He needs a bone marrow donor," Nate said.

I asked three-year-old Zack the same thing. I'm not sure he understood the question. He was much more interested in his play than he was in me. So then I asked, "Zack why do you love your Dad?"

His face lit up and his tongue wiggled out of his mouth. Then he said with a cute lisp, "Because we play together, spend time together and have fun together."

That's what it all came down to—togetherness—and a family trying to keep itself together as illness tried to pull their foundation apart.

When we were done talking, Chris and the boys tried to fly a kite. Hawaii may be the easiest place in the world to fly a kite because there's almost always a steady breeze. But the trade winds weren't active that day and the kite hardly flew. I wondered if that was a bad omen. After an hour or so we were done with the Pablos and off to cover the other elements of Chris's story with someone who had a similar story to tell.

The whole ride over to Ala Moana Park I couldn't stop thinking about how lucky Chris would have to be to find a person to match him, and how lucky that person might be to become a part of Chris's life. Secretly I wished it would be me. I also knew whoever it was that matched would have to have a lot of guts. They would have their pelvis drilled with the thickest of needles and then have the marrow sucked out. It kind of freaked me out.

Chris was smart enough to know that I and others would have queasy feelings about bone marrow donation. So in a brilliant PR attempt to get his story out for potential donors and to alleviate fears like mine, he put another face on leukemia. And what a pretty face it was. Chris set us up with Renee Adaniya, a charming twenty-something island girl. Renee was kamaaina, a petite girl with a cute, toothy smile. She looked local and talked local with a hint of pidgin English. Renee worked at the Hawaii Bone Marrow Donor Registry as an administrator. It was more than just a job for her. Renee was one of Hawaii's first non-related bone marrow donors and was happy to tell anyone who would listen about her good luck to match a man named Butch from Tennessee. What made the story even better was the contrast. She was Asian and hip. Butch was a white military man from Kentucky.

We used Renee as a sidebar, interweaving her story with Chris's. We wanted the viewers to see the big picture. Be like Renee—register at your local blood center, or at the next bone marrow registration drive and who knows? You could be the one to save a life. It worked, viewers responded. Chris started being recognized at the grocery store, the gas station and well wishers would tell him they were praying for him. He told them he appreciated it, but if they really wanted to help they'd come to his bone marrow registration drives. They did, by the hundreds.

I felt lucky and blessed to cover Chris's story because, selfishly, it came when I needed it most. Being a street reporter is not unlike being a cop, or a firefighter. Much of what you see is heartbreaking and there isn't much you can do about it. It carves at you. A lot of my colleagues were numb to it and were able to separate their own emotions from the mess. I couldn't. Sure I got to go home to a happy and loving wife each night, but it didn't change the fact that I'd probably cover a bleed-it-leads news story again tomorrow. Chris's story gave me a break from the negative news cycle. I prayed for him, especially to St. Jude.

The difference with Chris's story was there *was* something that could be done about his misfortune. He didn't have his health, but he had hope of recovery. He had a loving family and friends. And the community couldn't help but fall in love with him because he was a proud man who made himself vulnerable. Not a lot of guys can get in

front of camera with tears in their eyes and tell a bunch of strangers they're hurting and need help. Chris could, and he let me be a witness to it.

Chris also let me address a personal question I think a lot of us harbor within. Am I really making a difference? Before Chris's story I wasn't so sure. His story gave me internal validation. My work was worthy. There was more to me than just a talking head on the tube. I don't know if anyone else saw a difference, but I certainly *felt* it. I felt that feeling of satisfaction deep in my bones, where the marrow lived. And later I would find my marrow wasn't just for me.