

Bounce Back from MS? Bob Cafaro Did It

with Bethany Mitros



by Bethany Mitros
Haddon Township's Bob Cafaro is no stranger to impossibility. Years ago, when the Philadelphia Orchestra cellist could hardly see or walk, a doctor told him he would be on permanent disability. Despite the dire prognosis, he only missed a few weeks of work that year as he clawed his way back from a devastating multiple sclerosis diagnosis. Now, he shares his journey of survival to inspire others who might face their own impossibilities.

Unlike many professional musicians, Cafaro was not born with a cello in his hand and he did not grow up in a musical family. He started playing, like most other kids, in third grade at age nine. His school needed someone to play the cello, so Cafaro was chosen.

"Admittedly, I had an aptitude for the cello, but I lost interest," he explained. Cafaro picked up the guitar and for many years he was serious about the popular instrument. He learned to play folk music on the electric guitar and he served as lead guitarist in several rock and roll bands.

"My mom wouldn't let me quit the cello, though," he said, and when he was 15 or 16, he attended a four-week orchestral camp in Saratoga, NY that changed everything. "That was a turning point for me. It was the first time I played with a good orchestra. From that moment on, I knew I was going to devote my life to learning the cello," he said. Philadelphia Orchestra principal cellist William Stokking was a "guiding

light" for Cafaro.

Cafaro achieved his dream of becoming a professional cellist and won a seat in the prestigious Philadelphia Orchestra in 1985, a position he enjoys tremendously. "I get to play the cello for a living. I'd rather play the cello than deny unpaid health insurance claims, pull over cars or work on a road crew," he joked.

However, his successful career took an unexpected turn in 1999 when he was just 40 years old. "I started to get some numbness in my right leg. I was limping around. Doctors thought it was nothing, maybe a pinched nerve," he explained. Two months later, he lost peripheral vision in one eye, a condition called optic neuritis. "It was a textbook case of MS. When I was first diagnosed, I didn't want to believe it," he said. He did not have to right away though, because his vision stabilized and the numbness went away. "De Nile is not just a river in Egypt," said Cafaro, who was able to ignore his diagnosis until he began to lose peripheral vision in his other eye.

To combat his vision loss, Cafaro was given IV steroids. A week later, he thought he had a stomach bug, but it was just the start of MS attacking his entire body. He was hospitalized for a week. When he was released, he was unable to use his hands, he couldn't see or walk and he was incontinent. His brain and spinal cord were covered in lesions. "It was brutal," he said. The head neuro-ophthalmologist at Wills Eye Hospital told Cafaro he was going to write out



PLAY ON: Despite a dire diagnosis, Philadelphia Orchestra cellist Bob Cafaro battled back from a severe case of multiple sclerosis to live a healthy, normal life. He shares his inspiring story with others to offer hope to those facing similar challenges.

the paperwork to send him on permanent disability because "ninety-nine percent of people don't come back from this."

Cafaro was desperate, however, and told the doctor that was not happening. "I told him to take his note and use it as a suppository. I wasn't being arrogant, though. I was desperate. I said I'm going back to work in six weeks."

And he did. Six weeks later, Cafaro went back to work with the Philadelphia Orchestra, enlarging the music so he could read it and miming through the first months.

He began researching to find answers to MS, but Cafaro had one advantage over the medical

professionals - his lack of medical training meant that he didn't know what was impossible. Cafaro started drinking copious amounts of water every day. That's when he saw the first small improvements. He also looked at MS rates around the world and saw a correlation between the lavish American lifestyle and increased rates of MS. He decided to adopt a lifestyle similar to that of the Okinawa centenarians, with a simple, organic, low-calorie diet devoid of meat, dairy and alcohol. "It's a very disciplined lifestyle. I fast one day a week," he said.

Cafaro was not sure if he could still ride a bicycle, but he found he could still balance, so he

started some slow rides and began lifting weights to regain his strength.

During that time, he drew inspiration from other people who completed tasks that were considered impossible and he studied the psychology of survival. Cafaro started taking principal cellist auditions because he wanted to be known as someone who came back from the impossible and won the most demanding position. That way, he could be an inspiration as someone who beat a disease that could have killed him and encourage other people who faced similar mountains.

And he has done just that. Cafaro's improvement was gradual, but after 2-3 years, his symptoms had mostly abated. His brain and spinal cord MRIs are now completely clear, with no lesions. He does have slight vision loss, but otherwise, he has no physical symptoms.

Now he shares his story through speaking engagements and a book he wrote about his experience. "My goal is to help others," said Cafaro. Like Roger Bannister, who broke the 4-minute mile mark and showed the world it could be done, Cafaro hopes others will break his proverbial record using the knowledge and experience he gained while battling back from MS.

For more information on Bob Cafaro or to purchase his book, *When the Music Stopped*, visit bobcafaro.com.

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