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Illustration by Michael Schwab

With Flying Colors

Dealt a terrible hand—two sons with the same incurable brain cancer—Brock Greene '73 responds by taking urgent action.

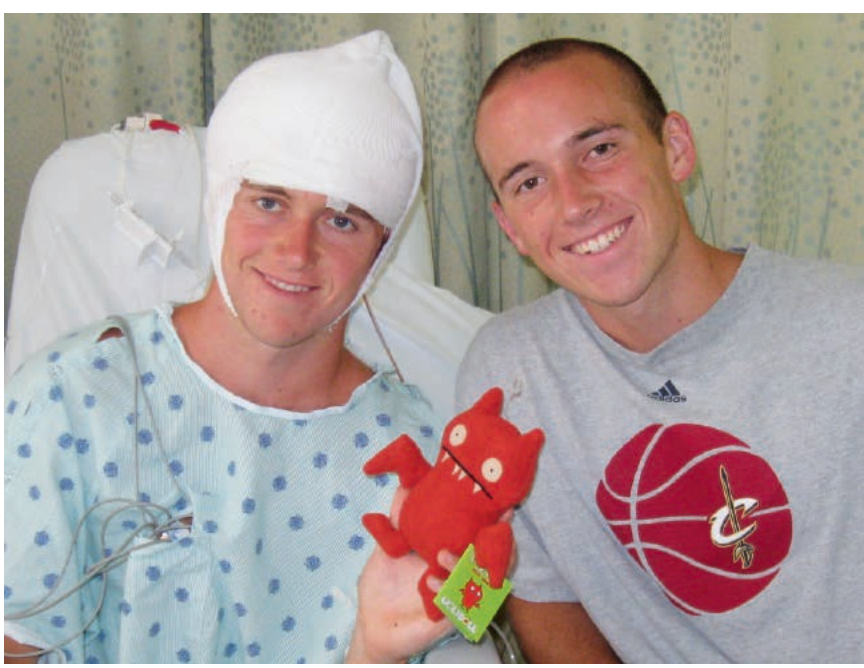
BY MEGAN TADY

AT 65 YEARS OLD, BROCK GREENE is retiring from his day job to take on the most urgent fight of his life—and the lives of his two sons, Spencer and Zach. Two years apart, both of his sons were diagnosed with the same form of rare brain cancer called oligodendroglioma. With no family history of brain cancer and no known genetic triggers, Greene spent a lot of time questioning the odds of this happening to his family. Then he got to work.

Greene discovered that research on oligodendroglioma, called "Oligo," is woefully underfunded compared to other forms of cancer. While his sons—Spencer is 28 and Zach is 31—are healthy and leading full lives at the moment, the family lives with the knowledge that the slow-moving cancer is currently incurable.

"There is no worse feeling than being helpless," Greene says. "With both my kids having a disease that is incurable, I did bottom out for a few months. But I remembered my Dad saying: 'Greenes don't take bad news lying down.' I have always believed that I could figure life out, and while this was on a totally different scale, I knew I had to try."

In 2014, Greene launched the nonprofit organization Oligo Nation, whose mission is to advocate for and fund innovative research on Oligo. Oligo Nation has issued 13 grant awards for research projects, totaling over $1,000,000—but the need is far greater. "The goal is to ensure enough medical research is done on our disease to discover better treatments that will let Zach and Spencer live their full lives," Greene says.



Zach and Spencer the day after Zach's first surgery in 2011

Learning the News, Twice

The tumor in Spencer's brain was the size of a lemon, but no one knew it. It was 2008, and he was a 17-year-old competitive soccer player who hadn't mentioned to his family the strange seizures happening in his arm while he played. Then Greene witnessed one of the seizures at home and said, "What the heck was that?"

After months of doctor appointments and tests, an MRI revealed the devastating truth. "I'm not sure it gets a lot worse than 'brain tumor' when a doctor gives you a diagnosis," he said.

Spencer's surgery to remove most of the tumor was successful, but it came back two years later. The family learned that chemo could shrink the tumor and keep it at bay, but there was no treatment to eradicate it altogether.

Life feeling all the more precious, the family gathered for a vacation in Mexico two months later, where

Zach, Pam, Brock and Spencer in Puerto Rico in December 2019

Greene's other son, Zach (then 21), had a grand mal seizure just hours after arriving. "A grand mal seizure is as scary as it gets," he says. "I thought he was going to die in my arms."

Zach was taken to the same hospital treating Spencer, and the family anxiously awaited his MRI results. "We were all convinced it couldn't be a brain tumor," Greene said. "The odds of that were unbelievably astronomical. I said to myself, 'I need to prepare to be the rock if they come back and say it's a brain tumor, because everybody else is going to fall to pieces.' In fact, that's how it worked out, and I was prepared. Although, it was actually my younger son who was really the rock that day."

For several months, Greene felt incapacitated by the news. "I did not have a breakdown, but I couldn't sleep, and I felt incredibly guilty," he said. "I had two kids with brain cancer, and I thought it had to be something to do with me."

Emerging from a fog, Greene started going to therapy for the first time and practicing meditation. He also reflected on the hardships his own parents had faced, and his conviction to act began to grow. "So much of how I've responded to this is based on my upbringing," he said. "My parents grew up in the Depression, and my Dad went to war. Nothing was given to them. The reality is that bad stuff happens to everybody. Our situation might be a little off the charts, but everybody is going to get bad news, and you've got to go out there and fix it."

He says his experience at Kent allowed him to draw from a deep well of resilience. "Kent contributed to my belief in myself and my self-reliance (Mr. Armstrong would be proud)," he says. "My boys' situation is so difficult and unfair to them. On the other hand, the way I was raised, the education I was given, the marketing skills I learned in my career, have allowed me to do what I am doing now."

Launching Oligo Nation

Greene sprang into action, learning all he could about Oligo and the world of cancer research. To his dismay, he found that brain cancer research was grossly underfunded compared to other cancers. For example, the largest brain tumor foundation, the National Brain Tumor Society, is just 3% of the size of the largest breast cancer foundation.

He says, "When I first looked around, there was no one investing in Oligo research. No one! I realized that all the breakthroughs in the world would mean nothing to my boys unless people were working on our disease. Even today, Oligo remains an afterthought in the brain cancer research community and the total funding is maybe $5 million."

While balancing his job running a marketing agency in San Francisco, California, he launched Oligo Nation to drum up attention and funding. He found himself dog paddling in an entirely different ocean, trying to understand the medical research process as well as the biology of cancer.

"My work in Oligo medical research is my steepest learning curve since learning how to talk at age two," he says. "It's a whole new language, cast of characters, industry dynamics, and the need to find the right paths to

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take is intense—my kids' well-being is riding on this. But I have to admit that I love being challenged this way and knowing that I am finally doing something important."

In an article in the spring 2015 issue of *Denison Magazine*, Spencer, who attended Denison University, expressed his appreciation for his father's fervent efforts. "It's incredible what my dad gets done," he said. "Our days are 24 hours; his must be 48. Not only is he starting his own nonprofit, not only is he the owner of his own business, but he also has the time to look into every single thing that's in the news. Every type of medical treatment that I have done, he's found."

Zach expressed similar sentiments that same year in a birthday letter to his father, a family tradition. He wrote, "So much of the love Spencer and I feel comes from people we hardly know, but who know you and want to donate their prayers, thoughts or money to help propel us through this."

The nonprofit also serves as a community of Oligo families supporting each other, helping people navigate the medical and emotional journeys of a diagnosis.

"The medical side is so foreign and complex," Greene says. "There really is no 'standard of care' or expectation that 'if we do this, we'll be okay.' And, unfortunately, there are a lot of patients getting suboptimal care because they are being treated at a hospital that maybe sees one Oligo a year or less."

He says the emotional journey is often harder, which is why support is so critical. "It feels like your life as you've known it has ended... and in some ways it has. A leading neurosurgeon told me that 70% of brain tumor patients go through depression at some time. And not just for the patient—the mothers, fathers, brothers, wives, children, they have all had their life plan blown up."

In 2020, Oligo Nation is poised to make its largest impact yet. For the first time, Greene will run the nonprofit full time, and he has formed a board of directors. His goal is to raise $1 million for Oligo research this year. He says he has been overwhelmed and deeply touched by the people, including his fellow Kent alumni, who have reached out to offer their support and encouragement.

"Every kind word, every donation, shows me that my friends believe in me and our effort," he said. "I can tell you this: If this hadn't happened to my family, I would never have known how loved I am. It is really humbling."

One of the people who reached out was Larry Gile '73, who was Greene's roommate at Kent. When he learned in 2019 about the Greene family's struggle, he wrote a letter to the Class of 1973 beseeching their help on behalf of his friend. "As a parent of two children, I can only imagine the feelings of terror, helplessness and anger that Brock felt," Gile said. "Direct action was my only option. I would hope that if (God forbid) Oligo or something similar befell my children, I would show the same tenacity and commitment to find the most effective means of fighting this illness."

With the threat of the cancer ever present, both Spencer and Zach are living "normal" lives. Zach is not currently undergoing treatment, but has an MRI every three months. He recently earned his PhD in physics from Columbia University and is working at an investment firm in Manhattan. Spencer is on a clinical trial, but his disease has been stable for three years. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area working in healthcare as a population health analyst.

While the family's experience casts no silver lining, Greene says they are closer than ever. "The situation that we live with has squeezed out any air between us, and we are so tight and so very appreciative of each other," he said. "We know the moments we are together are precious. I guess we never know how tough we are until we are really tested—but I feel like my whole family has passed with flying colors."

To learn more about Oligo Nation, visit https://www.oligonation.org/.