Making This the Right Place and The Right Time

By MICHAEL WEINER

In 1988, I was in the right place at the right time. I was clerking for U.S. District Court Judge H. Lee Sarokin in Newark and preparing to begin working for a small firm that represented employees and unions. That plan changed when Judge Sarokin introduced me to a friend, Larry Fleisher, who at the time was executive director of the NBA Players Association. Mr. Fleisher introduced me to Don Fehr, head of the baseball players union, and in September 1988 I went to work for the MLBPA. I’ve worked there for 25 years; since December 2009 I have been the executive director.

In 2012, I suppose, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time: In August I was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Since then I’ve undergone radiation and chemotherapy, under the care of the committed team at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, led by Dr. Andrew Lassman. I’ve been fortunate to have been able to work for the MLBPA close to full-time since my diagnosis.

Why do things happen the way they happen? Why have I been lucky enough to work my entire career for the MLBPA but unlucky enough to come down with a potentially fatal condition? I don’t even try to answer such questions. I honestly don’t fear what may come of my medical condition. I will fight as hard as I can, for as long as I can—and, hopefully, that’s a good, long fight. Most important, though, as corny as it sounds, I try to live each day to the fullest. I don’t take for granted what tomorrow may bring.

Which brings me back to my good fortune with the MLBPA, an incredibly stimulating place to work. On any given day I work on a range of issues: an interpretation of our collective bargaining agreement; a press inquiry about our drug program; a conference call about our pension plan; a discussion with a player and his agent about his contract negotiation; a strategic decision about the direction of international play. As a union lawyer, there isn’t a more challenging and exciting place to be.

What I most enjoy about the MLBPA are the people I get to work for—the players. Baseball players understand that the rights and benefits they enjoy did not drop out of the sky but result from sacrifices made by players before them. They also understand that they have a responsibility to the players of tomorrow, to ensure that the rights and interests of players are protected.

What I’ve learned recently about the players, though, is how generous and gracious they are. I’ve had the opportunity to get to know so many players over my career, and I’ve always known they are great guys. But their response to my family and me since my diagnosis has been humbling. Phone calls, text messages, e-mails, off-season visits—rarely a day has gone by without multiple expressions of support from the guys. Late last season I received signed jerseys from each of the 30 clubs, a much appreciated symbol that the players were in my corner. As I toured all 30 camps during spring training this year, I spoke with dozens of players who expressed sincere concern and offered support and prayers. I can’t explain how meaningful this has been to my wife, my three daughters and me. It has been a source of strength, a power boost when we need it most.

I understand that not everyone is fortunate enough to work in sports, much less for the MLBPA, and that I have a lot of advantages in dealing with my illness. Still, I’ve learned a few things about being in a tough spot since I’ve been diagnosed:

**Don’t go into a shell.** Don’t be afraid to talk about your situation, however painful, with those who inquire. People sincerely care, and you’d be surprised how good it feels to have genuine exchanges and, if only for a while, to let others help carry your load.

**Help others, even if you’re hurting.** No matter how you feel, chances are there is someone in a worse way than you. You’ll feel better if you help someone else. And regardless of how you might feel, don’t underestimate your ability to do it.

**Don’t lose your sense of humor.** Diseases usually aren’t funny; brain cancer certainly isn’t. But the people around you will feel more comfortable, and you’ll feel more comfortable yourself, if you’re not afraid to laugh.

**Keep living your life.** To the extent possible, do what you like to do. Work if you can, and if you enjoy it. Relish your family and friends. Go to ballgames. Whatever you like to do, do it—and cherish those moments.

My goal every day is to practice what I have learned. It’s the best way I know to make right now the right place and the right time.

Michael Weiner has been the executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association since 2009.