

[SEIZE the day]

Life can begin *after cancer!*

For these survivors, a cancer diagnosis was the nudge they needed to make their wildest dreams come true

"I was a hit on Letterman"

When he was 12, Steve Mazan dreamed of appearing on the *Late Show with David Letterman* as a stand-up comic. "I thought he was hilarious, but my parents didn't like him, which made me like him even more," says Steve, 41, who ultimately carved out a successful stand-up career in San Francisco-area clubs and beyond.

It wasn't until 2005, when he was diagnosed with a rare, incurable cancer of the intestines and liver, that he put his childhood dream on his bucket list of things to do before he died. After surgery to remove 12 inches of his intestines, Steve's doctor said he might live another five years. That, says Steve, who was only 34 at the time, was his wake-up call. "I realized that I was waiting for the Letterman dream to come to me," he recalls.

So Steve hatched a grassroots plan to get himself on Letterman's radar as fast as possible. He launched a website called *DyingToDoLetterman.com*, where friends and fans could email Letterman's producers to implore them to audition Steve for the show. Instead of getting a "yes," he received a cease-and-desist letter from Letterman's law-



Steve Mazan was "dying to do Letterman"

yers. But Steve didn't give up. "Every time I hit an obstacle, I found a way around it," he says.

Steve continued to revamp his routine and resend his DVDs over and over. Finally, he appeared on Letterman's show in September 2009. He went on stage as a comedian, not a cancer patient.

Steve had to pause five times to wait for applause. Even better, Letterman praised Steve on the air:

"Very funny. Great job." At last, Steve had proven himself to his childhood hero.

It's been seven years since his grim diagnosis, and Steve's story has been turned into a book and a documentary entitled *Dying to Do Letterman*.

"I'm a cynical guy, but I do like to believe that chasing this dream has kept my tumors from growing rapidly," he says. ▶

[SEIZE the day]



Alyssa Phillips, 34, was feeling down in a hospital isolation unit when her husband, Neil, said, "If you could go anywhere when this is all over, where can I take you?" She knew the answer instantly. "Santorini," she said, referring to an island off the coast of Greece, even though she and Neil knew she might not survive the treatments for her disease.

A shocking diagnosis

Just three years earlier, in 2008, Alyssa was working as a physician assistant, running in half-marathons

and trying to get pregnant. She saw her doctor because she was experiencing vaginal discharge. What was initially thought to be an infection turned out to be an aggressive tumor—a 4-centimeter polyp on her cervix that quadrupled in size in just six days. She was diagnosed with large-cell cervical neuroendocrine cancer, a disease so rare there have been fewer than 65 documented cases. Doctors gave her a less than 5% chance of survival. "I was in complete shock," she says. Alyssa had an emergency hysterectomy, six rounds of chemotherapy and two bone marrow transplants. Her body was so fragile she wasn't allowed to go anywhere but home and to the hospital for treatments for nearly a year.

Six months after her last bone marrow transplant, she was cleared to fly. Over the past two years, she's traveled all over the world. She's snorkeled and kayaked in the Maldives (a group of islands in the Indian Ocean), zip-lined and rappelled a waterfall in Costa Rica, ridden a camel in Israel and gone white-water rafting in Utah. "Cancer triggered my adventurous side," she says. "I felt so full of life."

Living on bonus time

Today, Alyssa, who has been in remission for three years, is speaking and writing about her experience. She hopes to return to Costa Rica for more rappelling and possibly Vietnam. "Most people fear the unknown, but now I thrive on it," she says. "I'm living on bonus time." **MD** —Jen Singer

HOW TO THRIVE DURING TREATMENT

1 Picture yourself healthy. Alyssa wanted to surround herself with positive images and words, so she used two vision boards (collections of photos pinned to boards to help you visualize change in your life) and an affirmation board (a piece of foam on which you can write positive expressions to

psych you up). Twice a day, in front of a mirror, she would say things like "I am healed."

• **How it might help you:** A review of 46 studies shows that guided imagery—in which you imagine yourself achieving a specific goal, such as being cured—may help reduce the side effects

of chemotherapy and reduce pain, anxiety and depression, according to the American Cancer Society.

2 Make technology your friend. Alyssa downloaded inspirational podcasts and her favorite tunes to listen to during treatment. She also brought along

photos of her vision and affirmation boards.

3 Get moving. "Exercise was a source of comfort [when I was confined to my home]," says Alyssa. • **How it might help you:** Exercise can help reduce fatigue and may prolong survival.