

Our first #PurposeinPeabody feature is the Melanoma Education Foundation. MEF was founded by a longtime Peabody resident and continues to be based here in the city. We recently spoke with Steve Fine, MEF's president and founder, about the organization's cause and the story of how it came to be. We've shared Steve's words below.

"Dan was 26. He was diagnosed two years earlier. He was working in California on a temporary job and he came home on a surprise visit the Memorial Day weekend of 1996. And when he came out of the shower I realized a large mole in the lower part of his back and I told him I didn't like the looks of that you have to get it checked out right away. So three days later he was back in California and got it checked out that same day. They removed it and about 10 days after that the biopsy report came back and it was a late-stage melanoma. And he needed treatment. Unfortunately the treatments then weren't very effective. And he had a number of treatments over the next two years and none of them really did anything. He didn't realize he had it until it was too late.

Prior to his being hit with melanoma I knew very little about it. After he passed away I started doing research on it because I wanted to start a website and I realized the reason people didn't know about it was because they weren't being taught about it in their schools and the reason they weren't being taught about it in the schools was because their teachers didn't know much about it either. So we started by doing teacher training sessions here on the North Shore. Eventually we put together a lesson plan including a video and handouts for students. It could easily be done in a single class session. We started here on the North Shore offering that lesson plan and teacher training to high schools in the area. And then we expanded to the other NE states and then we offered similar training to middle school teachers. Eventually we expanded throughout the U.S. Today, we are in 49 states with over 1700 schools using our lessons.

It was a huge amount of work. In 2001, I stopped all other work except the foundation and since then I've devoted full time to it. Dan, before he passed, said if he survived he wanted to educate other people about melanoma. And I told him I would help him do that. And unfortunately he didn't make it. And I felt that it was something that I wanted to do.

There was never a time when I thought I was in over my head. There were obstacles. Funding is always an obstacle. Taking a different path than most health teachers take was an obstacle. Health teachers, if they do teach skin cancer, they focus almost entirely on sun safety and sun protection. And that is not an effective approach for teens. It works for elementary school students, but not for teens. So what we did instead was say look we aren't going to preach to you about how important it is to protect yourself from the sun. Instead, we are going to educate you about melanoma, what to look for, and what will happen if you don't find it early and show them pictures and stories of young people who have lost their lives to melanoma.

Right from the start we got emails, not only from the North Shore, but from students all over the country and their teachers telling us about the impact. And we know of a couple of local students whose lives were saved because of the lesson, and teachers whose lives were saved, and even parents of students whose lives were saved. And those are just the ones that we know about. And from what we can gather there are many many more we don't know about.

Melanoma is a disease that is much more common than people realize. If you look at the statistics the American Cancer Society is predicting 140,000 more cases of melanoma in the U.S. alone this year. If you compare that with new HIV cases it's about 56,000 in the entire country. Every high school student graduates knowing about HIV/AIDS, yet relatively few graduate knowing about

melanoma. However, melanoma is much more deadly than HIV/AIDS and much more prevalent. And it can affect young people. It is much more common than people realize. There is this underlying notion among people who haven't been educated about it that it's just a skin cancer so it can't be that bad.

I think the understanding has increased over the years. Especially around here on the North Shore and in Massachusetts. Part of the lesson we give students is a homework assignment to educate their parents about melanoma. At the end of the lesson most students know more about melanoma than their parents. So students love putting the shoe on the other foot and acting as teacher. I think that has had an impact. And we hear all the time from parents that they know about melanoma now. And it's gratifying to hear that."