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JIM: Today, our guest is Roger Sweeney, a cancer, epilepsy, and stroke survivor, who is a true inspiration to me, who has been willing to share his story with the hopes that people don’t make the same mistakes that he made in some of the decisions early in his life. Welcome, Roger.

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ROGER SWEENEY: Hi, Jim. How are you?

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JIM: I am fantastic. I so appreciate you taking time and the willingness to share your story. For our guests out there, I met Roger at a conference a few months ago. Someone said I just had to meet Roger so we got a chance to meet and, it turns out, we were almost neighbors. You grew up in the Milwaukee area or were working in the Milwaukee area. That’s the area that I’m from. I know, now, I believe you live in Seattle but here we’re from the same neck of the woods and you have one heck of a compelling story and, rather than me try to share the story, why don’t you just share a little bit about your background, where you grew up, where you were working, and then let’s get into the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say.

1:02

ROGER SWEENEY: Thank you, Jim. I’m pleased to talk with you. Well, my name, again, is Roger Sweeney and I was in public accounting out of college, worked for PricewaterhouseCoopers and then I went to a young company in the healthcare industry and we sold the company to General Electric Healthcare, and that’s what got me back in Milwaukee and that was a great experience and I loved Milwaukee, believe it or not. I was there for over four years and loved every minute of it. I lived in this little town called Whitefish Bay. The issue I want to talk to you about, disability. Let me tell you a little bit about my history. I moved into Milwaukee in May of 2003 and then, in September 2003, I was diagnosed with brain cancer and that’s hard to believe when you’re only 35 but I had no choice. I had to face it and do whatever I can to beat it so I went through surgery, 17 cycles of chemotherapy, six weeks of radiation, and it took me about a year and a half to get a good start on life. I started coming out and seeing the light a little bit but I still had a hard time controlling the epilepsy and I tried every different medication there was but I just couldn’t get a handle on it and it was terrible. My surgeon came back and said, Roger, we can do a second surgery on it and you’ll be back at work and your life is going to be so good, you’ll be back to work in a month. I was concerned about the insurance, my long-term insurance. When I became an employee of General Electric, I chose to not have long-term disability insurance because I was an office worker, I had six months of disability and insurance and I had life insurance, and so I thought, well, maybe I’ll reconsider when I get older as something more dangerous comes to me and I didn’t accept those. I started thinking, after the first surgery, I needed to get it back because I was really scared. I was scared that I wouldn’t make it and what was going to happen so I went back and tried to reapply for long-term disability. Of course, I didn’t expect to receive it but I’ve got to at least take the opportunity and try it and I was declined. I still went back to my doctor and told him about my fear and he said, well, there is a 2% chance of having a stroke during the surgery but my doctor said 2% is 2%, that’s a very low risk, and I said, well, okay, and so I went back and talked to my employer GE Healthcare and there was an opportunity in the system where, if I quit GE and reapplied for GE, the insurance wouldn’t deny me and so I went to my manager and explained the situation and, again, I just wanted long-term disability as a source of security. I had no idea or no perception that I would have long-term disability after the surgery but I just wanted to secure everything. Anyway, GE said, well, we don’t think that would be appropriate if you left the company and, so, I understood and I went back to the doctor and told him. He said, well, everything is at a chance and a risk so I had the second surgery and I got a stroke right during surgery. I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t talk, and I was in the hospital for three months. I did over 500 sessions of physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy. I was scared to death because I told myself I have to win this battle because I’ve got a beautiful family, I’ve got a beautiful house, I’ve got a beautiful job, and everything was together and I had the fear that it would be lost. After the six months expired, I was still going through all the therapies but I tried to go back to GE and I wasn’t capable and I wasn’t physically or mentally to do my old job. At that point, that’s when everything started coming down. I didn’t have any income so I had to start cashing out. I had funds for my kids and I had to cash that in to make the payments on the house and the bills and everything, had to cash that in. I had to sell some investment accounts. I had to downsize the home and, every time we did something like that, I was just praying that things would turn around but it didn’t the way I expected it to.

5:04

JIM: Roger, I’ve just got to interrupt you for a just a second. You’re not in the financial services business and I’ve had a lot of people that I’ve counseled through the years and I’ve talked to other advisors that are in this where they’re talking to people about disability and I think there’s a big mistake that a lot of people have out there, which they have this assumption between thinking short-term disability covers for them for long-term and you had a conscientious decision. You knew the difference and, unfortunately, you made a conscientious decision, when most of us do that, when the skies are clear, especially when we’re young, we make a lot of choices based on everything is always going to work out, and how old were you when all this happened?

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ROGER SWEENEY: The first cancer surgery was 33 and then the second surgery when I was 35.

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JIM: So, you were at a fairly young age but you had the kids. You were already to starting to think about family and things like that but, by the time you made the decision to look at getting long-term disability, you already had the health issues and people don’t think that’s going to happen to them.

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ROGER SWEENEY: It was too late. That’s the whole story because I knew I had life insurance secured, I bought it independently outside of General Electric. It was kind of a silver rock on top and I just counted on that and said, well, if I have a crash in an airplane, that’s going to be great. My kids will be fine and everything and, you’re right. Most people don’t understand the difference between short-term disability and long-term disability, and I had the right to choose long-term disability but it was a good $150 a month and I said, well, I’ll re-evaluate long-term disability in a couple of years or so.

6:37

JIM: I remember when we first met, when we were introduced, you were sharing your story and I remember you very vividly, I’ll never forget this, where you told me the first thought you had when you realized you had a stroke was, oh my god, I don’t have long-term disability.

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ROGER SWEENEY: Yep, exactly.

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JIM: The same issue happens with people with long-term care. They need long-term care and they don’t have the insurance for it and they have their savings and I think you’re going through the same thing at a much younger age. Here, you’ve got a young wife, you’ve got your kids, and you’re just paying the bills out of these resources and slowly, financially, you’re just bleeding until when.

7:15

ROGER SWEENEY: Exactly. Before we start again, there’s something else I want to mention to you. Many people question that there was a malpractice situation but it wasn’t. My surgeon did the best he could and we had this happen. He’s a 55-year-old and he’s been doing it for 30 years and it has only happened to him three times and I was the third one so I couldn’t go down that route. If compared to Europe and things like that, you’ll recover financially but, in the United States, as soon as you pre-surgery, you sign off the liabilities and I just had no chance of looking anywhere.

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JIM: So, now, you’re paying the bills, you said you’re going through your savings. What happened next?

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ROGER SWEENEY: I’d like to recap something real quick. A triple whammy hit me, I’m a cancer survivor, I’m a Grade 3, which is average for people is two to three years, and I also had epilepsy and, obviously, the third is the stroke and once you have a stroke, disability effects 75% of stroke survivors and, when you’re looking at me and you add them all up, it’s not good. I have a 0.002 chance of living so, as I was indicating to you, I spent over three months in the hospital and, of course, it was quite dramatic. I had partial blindness. I lost use of my right arm. I wear a constant leg brace and, legally, I can’t drive because of the eyesight at times, so, let me talk to you a little bit about financial down the drain. Well, I knew I needed to save my life and I needed to save my whole family’s life. I desperately wanted to recover and get back to my life. I lost my job at General Electric was basically $150,000. I was hit from every direction, physical, emotional, financial, family, divorce, empty bank accounts, investments. I lost my home. I had to sell some automobiles, equity, and the kids’ college funds were gone too so, for example, I had over $300,000 of assets, GE salary, healthcare, cars, etc., investments, college funds, and if I would have been smart enough or wise enough for long-term disability, I would have saved 50% of my salary, 50% of my salary, and I don’t think I would have lost these assets, which are family assets, but, unfortunately, it happened to me and, because I had to lose everything, today, I am just on social security disability.

9:43

JIM: I know for a lot of people with disability income from social security sometimes that takes a while to even be able to get the benefits. How did it work in your circumstance?

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ROGER SWEENEY: In my case, some other people had suggested it’s going to be difficult to get social security but, because the short-term disability is for six months, typically, they have to wait six months for social security disability insurance. When I submitted my application to social security, because of my health, they passed it the first try and a lot of people came back to me and said I can’t believe you had such an easy time with social security and I tell people I am not supposed to be here. By statistically, I’m not supposed to be here and social security didn’t argue with me so I was very lucky there at that point.

10:26

JIM: So, unfortunately, you’ve gone through a lot of trial and tribulations not only with your health but you lost your life, basically, your wife, your kids, the financial nest egg that you had started to build for yourself. You shared with me, also, there was a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel with your insurance but you were kind of stuck out on your own figuring it out so talk a little bit about what happened there with your life insurance.

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ROGER SWEENEY: That’s important because that’s one of the life’s statistical happiness. I had no idea that there was a source of income in this world. Because I still had my life insurance, I wanted to reach in and grab that because, Jesus, I was on the edge of my life and I have to wait to die and support my family and I couldn’t figure it out so I did some research on what they call viatical so I did some research on the internet surfing for life insurance buyers and then, finally, I discovered it’s available for me because of my diagnosis and there are a lot of companies in the United States that do that for a living. How it works, corporations focus on life insurance and what they do, they reach out and say, look, we understand you’re not a diagnosis. You haven’t been told from your doctor you’re going to pass away in two years so I discovered, once again, I started negotiations with this corporation and they were willing to cash in 50% of my life insurance but it’s not like they give you face value, they negotiate with you how much you want, and the idea is you get immediate cash sooner to put in your account and someone, hopefully, give you a smile but they have a profit. As soon as one dies, they’ll receive the other profit and that’s what I did. That corporation provided me a revenue and, because I was still going through a divorce, I had to give my ex-wife some of it. This happened about six years ago and I put it in an investment account and I’m not rich but I have to carefully watch it a little bit that I still have savings from that transaction and that transaction is the source of my life.

12:34

JIM: And that’s something that I know we’ve talked about on different shows in the past and it’s something that’s not necessarily new but people are newly becoming aware of it and there’s viatical settlements, there’s life settlements, and here’s one of the reasons why you want to work closely with an advisor. I mean, here, in your circumstance, you had to discover it on your own but one of the reasons for having life insurance, life insurance is an asset, and there’s a lot of companies, if you feel you don’t need your life insurance anymore, before you just cash it out, you might want to look into this because it can pay you a lot more than just surrendering for cash value so a reason to talk to your advisor before you let any of this type of insurance go. Roger, we’ve been visiting for a while and you definitely have an inspirational story. Tell the audience why is it that you want to share your story? What is compelling you to share your story with others today?

13:29

ROGER SWEENEY: It’s just about the education. As I mentioned before, I didn’t understand these opportunities and if someone were to approach me about life settlements, I probably wouldn’t be here having a discussion with you and I probably wouldn’t have lost my $300,000 or even particularly, we don’t know what happened with the family or how it broke up or anything, but that’s what I wasn’t informed and I am desperately trying to educate people that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and my life light was the life settlement program and I just can’t say how much I would like to inform everyone else and, of course, you understand the issue. There’s 67% of America doesn’t have long-term disability insurance and so it’s my goal, I want to go out and reach those 67% and say, look, here’s my story and with a nice wonderful family and look what happened to me and I’ll tell you what, over the last two years when I set up my web and I set up my seven minute film, I encourage people to go to my web and see that seven minute film. Over two years, I’ve had over 100 or 200 people look at my web and then they quickly send me an email in a couple of days or whatever and they say, Roger, we watched your video and, you know what, we went down and talked to our agent and we made sure we had long-term disability for my family.

14:49

JIM: So, how do they get that?

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ROGER SWEENEY: They got to my web, which is www.rogersinspiration.com and right on the front there’s a seven minute video with my whole lifestyle and they learn that I didn’t have long-term disability and it destroyed my life and so they email me and they say, Roger, thank you very much for the work you’re doing. It made me and my wife go down to our agent and get long-term disability insurance. To me, I feel so good. Every time I see a family and I understand don’t have long-term disability, I cringe. I try to educate people. I don’t get in their face. I just say, you know what, here’s my story, here’s my website. Call me if I can help you and that happens all the time.

15:33

JIM: Well, you know, Roger, I think I shared this with you when I first met you. I think you should go out and get your insurance license and help counsel people on the disability income but I know, right now, you see a lot of people that get affected by health situations like you have and they pretty much give up and just kind of live out their days but, man, you’re getting out there, you’re talking to people, and I just want to share with people, too, that you speak professionally on the topic now and, if there’s any groups out there, whether it’s a church group, a civic group, company, whatever the case may be, or if you’re an insurance group or company, you want to share your story so how do they reach out to you to have you share the story?

16:13

ROGER SWEENEY: Well, it’s my passion. They can either go to my web, there’s a link, there’s my email address, which is roger@rogersinspiration.com.

16:24

JIM: I’ve got your number as 1-414-581-1908. Is that right?

16:28

ROGER SWEENEY: That’s right.

16:29

JIM: So, again, it’s 414-581-1908. I’m glad to see you kept a little bit of Milwaukee with you because 414 is the Milwaukee area code so even though you’re in Seattle, they can reach you on that Milwaukee cell number, right?

16:42

ROGER SWEENEY: Right, and I do love Milwaukee. I’m a volunteer every year. I fly back and go to the Summerfest, and I love seeing all of the Milwaukee people.

16:50

JIM: Roger, thanks for sharing your story. I know it sometimes can be difficult, especially for those of us guys. We usually like to hold our pride kind of tight to the vest and your willingness to share a story and admit the mistakes that you’ve made to help inspire others, that’s awesome. I have a lot of respect for you and wish you well in your future and would strongly encourage you to consider getting in the profession of helping to counsel people on their disability income.

17:15

ROGER SWEENEY: I appreciate that and I’m halfway studying for that right this moment. Thank you very much.

17:21

JIM: Thanks for joining us this week and tune in again next week as we explore another phase of the Real Wealth process and, remember, if anything you heard in today’s show you’d like to get more information about, contact your Real Wealth advisor. Also, if you feel that any of this information will be helpful to a friend or family member, just click the Forward to a Friend button.