

Thinking Outside the Box:
A tribute to the life & memory of James "Rhio" O'Connor
Written By: Rebecca Akers

"If you don't like something change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it." - Mary Engelbreit

What would you do if you were given a dire cancer diagnosis? You might automatically think you've been sentenced to die. Your doctor may refer you to an oncologist who will give you the standard treatment options- surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, etc. Like many other patients, you might feel helpless, uneducated, and overwhelmed.

This was not the case for James "Rhio" O'Connor. Rhio was diagnosed with [Mesothelioma](#), a type of aggressive cancer that grows in the sac surrounding the internal organs. The most likely cause of Mesothelioma is exposure to asbestos, but the symptoms don't appear until decades after the exposure. The prognosis for patients diagnosed with Mesothelioma is bleak at best; most patients have only a year to live after the diagnosis has been made.

Despite the odds being set against him, Rhio was determined to beat his disease. After his diagnosis and being given one-year to live, he began researching Mesothelioma and the treatments offered to him; he was unwavering in his quest to find the right treatments for himself. The treatment options for Mesothelioma can be conventional, such as chemotherapy, or alternative, such acupuncture, massage, or herbal supplements. Through the research process, Rhio was empowered to make many critical decisions about his medical care, allowing him to live six years beyond his prognosis.

Rhio's story is inspiring. This is a story, not about cancer or Mesothelioma, but about hope, passion, and optimism. Not everyone will be faced with a diagnosis like Mesothelioma, but all of us will be faced with adversity in our lives. Adversity comes in many forms, such as poverty, illness, divorce, or even the loss of a loved one. We can all look to Rhio O'Connor as an example of overcoming hardships.

The quote by the artist Mary Engelbreit at the beginning of this essay reminded me of Rhio's story. Engelbreit speaks to the spirit of resilience and the human ability to create a feeling of hope through our intellectual abilities. Rhio was faced with a situation that he certainly did not like, but there was nothing he could do to change it. Instead he changed the way he thought about it, by focusing on the things he could change, such as

his quality of life and medical care. There are many times in life we are faced with unpleasant situations that we cannot change, but it is up to each individual to change the way they think about the situation- to "think outside the box".

I hope that if I am ever faced with a dismal diagnosis, such as Mesothelioma, I will have the strength to follow in the footsteps of Rhio O'Connor. The treatments that worked for him might not work for everyone, and maybe wouldn't work for me. That is why I would advocate for my personal rights and educate myself in order to make the best decision for me. As a college student, I have learned many research skills that I could use to learn more about my diagnosis. Above all else, Rhio was able to think outside the box, and that is what I hope I would be able to do.

In the face of adversity, we often need the support, encouragement, and wisdom of others. In the instance that I was diagnosed with cancer, I would turn to individuals that I trust and who have knowledge in this subject to assist me. In 2008 my grandfather was diagnosed with Parotid Squamous Cell cancer. In addition to talking with several doctors, he turned to my mother, who is a nurse, to help him make decisions about his treatments. The whole family, myself included, started going onto the internet to research this type of cancer; there is a wealth of information available online, if you are willing to take the time to find it. Initially, granddad was hesitant about undergoing cancer treatments. He told us that he'd enjoyed a good life and he seemed to accept his dismal fate. Mom encouraged him to learn more about his options and to at least consider treatments. After much persuasion, he underwent surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy to control the disease. Currently, he is cancer-free and happy about his decision to follow through with treatment.

The purpose of this essay is to share the story of Rhio O'Connor's battle with Mesothelioma so that others may learn from it and be inspired to overcome their own personal adversities. Although Rhio eventually lost his battle with cancer, he demonstrated wonderful optimism, confidence, and resilience and that is the legacy that he leaves behind. Although I have never met Rhio O'Connor, I have been touched by his story and I hope that it has touched you too.

If you want to learn more about the cancer that took the life of James "Rhio" O'Connor, please visit the website www.survivingmesothelioma.com.