

Yale  
NewHaven  
**Health**  
Yale New Haven  
Hospital

# Spotlight



ADVERSITY

*We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.*

## At only 24, he said his final good-byes to his family

***But thanks to donors like you,*** he just celebrated his 40th birthday!

**IN THE SPRING OF 2008, CHRIS'S FUTURE LOOKED PICTURE-PERFECT.** His first year of law school was under his belt, and he'd just met the wonderful Ashley, who later would become his wife.

But, just after final exams, Chris started having terrible headaches and experiencing double vision. He knew something was very wrong. His doctor was concerned, too, and sent him for an MRI. Awful news followed — there was a large mass in his brain, behind the optic nerve. There was no time to waste.

Chris went straight from the doctor's office to YNHH, where Joseph Piepmeier, MD, (who was

Chief of the Section of Surgical Neuro-oncology at the time) and a surgical team were already waiting for him.

### **A tumor the size of a grapefruit**

"It was such a blur," Chris recalls. "They were explaining my condition. And at the same time, they were preparing me for surgery the very next day."

The tumor was not malignant, but that was a small comfort. Even if it wasn't cancerous, it was growing inside Chris's skull, pressing on his brain.

Chris and his family were still in shock the next

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morning when he was wheeled into the OR. More than nine tense hours later, Dr. Piepmeier emerged to share the good news: he'd been able to remove about 99% of the tumor.

For three days, Chris seemed to be recovering well. But the fourth day was catastrophic. He suffered a major setback, and was rushed into emergency surgery to remove a blood clot and implant a catheter. His blood work revealed a serious infection.

For the second time in just a few days, Chris was wheeled into the OR, wondering whether he'd ever wake up and see his family again.

### The third surgery's the charm

Dr. Piepmeier repaired the blood clot and saved Chris's life once more. But the consequences of the infection led to "one of the lowest times of my life," says Chris.

Chris had lost the ability to communicate. "I'd try to say or write something," he says. "But I just couldn't get the words out." After two months of intensive therapy, he was making little progress.

Chris hit rock bottom when a neuropsychiatrist told him that returning to law school was out of the question. "It was so upsetting, because in my head, I could think clearly and the words were there," he says.

Dr. Piepmeier suggested a third surgery to implant a shunt to relieve the pressure in Chris's brain. Typically, this procedure restores some functionality to patients over a period of six to 18 months. Somehow, Chris knew he could beat the "typical" outcome.

The morning after his third surgery, Chris's parents walked into his room, and were stunned when he greeted them for the first time in months: "Good morning, Mom, Good morning, Dad. How are you today?" He was back!

### From life-threatening diagnosis to lifelong purpose

Chris did indeed complete law school, but he has since required two additional surgeries and gamma knife radiosurgery. His life-changing experiences



Chris, with Karen (his mom), Tony (his dad), and Ashley (his wife). "My family members were my champions, my supporters – no matter what. Even on the darkest of days."

led him to a new career path. He decided to dedicate his life to helping other brain tumor patients and advancing research into this terrible disease.

In 2014, Chris and his family organized "*Playing for the Cure: Brainstormin'*," an annual benefit concert that takes place at Stony Creek Brewery each September (for more information see the events page at [www.CTBTA.org](http://www.CTBTA.org)). The first five years alone, *Brainstormin'* raised nearly \$200,000 with a large portion of the proceeds supporting the Oncology Social Work and Brain Tumor programs at Smilow Cancer Hospital and Yale Cancer Center.

In 2018, Chris became Executive Director of the Connecticut Brain Tumor Alliance, an organization dedicated to supporting brain tumor patients and their families and providing funding to five CT brain tumor centers – including Smilow Cancer Hospital.

"I wouldn't wish this diagnosis on my worst enemy," says Chris. "Yet, it may have been the best thing that ever happened to me. Because it gave me such purpose and perspective." Thanks to Chris and the work of the CTBTA, brain tumor patients have a place to go for help.

Which is exactly what you – our donors – provided for Chris in his darkest days, with your generous gifts to YNHH. **THANK YOU.** ♥


As Chris often says:

## “Our job isn’t done until a cure is found.”

**Today**, as Executive Director of the CT Brain Tumor Alliance, Chris provides a listening ear to brain tumor patients. “To help people going through what I went through – sharing my story, giving my perspective, and offering my guidance and encouragement – it means the world to them. And it makes me feel so satisfied to know that I’m making a difference.”



You can find out more about Chris’s medical journey and the amazing work being done at the CT Brain Tumor Alliance here: [www.CTBTA.org](http://www.CTBTA.org)

Visit [givetoynhh.org/BTFund24](http://givetoynhh.org/BTFund24) to make a life-saving gift to the Brain Tumor Program Fund today. Or **scan this code now:** 



### CREATIVE GIVING



← **Perfect...and perfectly healthy!** You’d never know that little Ian — shown here with his parents Gunsoo and Seung Min — has had two open heart surgeries to repair a congenital heart defect.

a scholarship. And he chose his profession as a Taekwondo Master and teacher because he wanted to share his love of the ancient martial art.

So it’s no surprise that when Gunsoo was looking for a way to raise funds for the Yale New Haven Children’s Hospital, he turned to Taekwondo.

#### **Gunsoo’s very personal reason for giving**

Gunsoo had the most compelling reason you could imagine to support YNHCH — our cardiologists saved his newborn baby’s life.

Gunsoo and Seung Min, a fellow student, married in 2019 and the couple were overjoyed when Seung Min became pregnant a few years later. Gunsoo remembers the first ultrasound at Seung Min’s three-month checkup. “I was joking around, suggesting funny names for the baby,” he says.

The joking stopped abruptly when the doctor told Gunsoo and Seung Min that something appeared to be wrong with the baby’s heart. A cardiologist soon

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## Breaking boards for YNHCH

TAEKWONDO, THE ANCIENT MARTIAL ART, has shaped every aspect of Gunsoo’s life. He began training and competing as a small child in South Korea, eventually becoming a Korean National Champion. He came to the U.S. because the University of Bridgeport — one of only a few schools to offer a bachelor’s degree in martial arts — offered him



← **Master Gunsoo (left)**, Ian's dad, and his business partner, Master KJ (right), raised over \$3,000 for YNHCH with *Breaking for Miracles*, a taekwondo fundraising event.

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diagnosed a rare, serious congenital condition called Tetralogy of Fallot.

A baby born with this condition has four different structural heart problems that cause altered blood flow through the heart and body. Gunsoo and Seung Min were told their baby would need open-heart surgery shortly after birth to repair his heart.

The parents-to-be were devastated. “Ian was our first child,” Gunsoo says. “We were so young, so shocked.” The fact that their families were far away in Korea made it even more difficult.

Ian was born on June 4, 2022. Seven anxious months went by before his medical team decided the time was right for the surgery in January 2023. Since then, he’s had another open-heart surgery and two more procedures to repair his heart. Today, he is healthy and strong. Gunsoo was so grateful, he wanted to find a way to give back.

### Kicking and punching for dollars

Gunsoo thought back to long days in the PCICU

(pediatric cardiac intensive care unit) at YNHCH during Ian’s surgery and recovery. “We were lucky — with our flexible schedules we were able to be with Ian all day,” he says. “We felt very sad that many parents were working so hard to pay their medical bills that they barely had time to spend with their baby. I wanted to help those families.”

Last February, Master Gunsoo held a Valentine’s Day Parents Night Out at his studio, World Taekwondo Monroe. He raised \$1,180 — and every penny went to YNHCH.

And in November, Master Gunsoo and Master KJ (his mentor and business partner) held an event called *Breaking for Miracles* to raise even more for YNHCH. For every five-dollar donation, a child got the opportunity to use their taekwondo skills to break a board with a punch or a kick. In just two hours, the event raised \$3,150! And Masters KJ and Gunsoo matched it to bring the total gift to \$6,300!

**Thank you, Gunsoo, Seung Min, and Ian for your creative generosity! ♥**



## HOPE RIDES WITH US.

Join us on September 7 and ride 10, 25, 40, 65, or 100 miles. Routes start and end at the historic Yale Bowl in New Haven, Connecticut. Or join us remotely and ride any distance from wherever you are!

