

DAILY SOUTHTOWN

Orland Park comedian Tim Cavanagh back to laughing after pancreatic cancer nearly took his life



Tim Cavanagh and his wife, Chris Barclay, toast to Tim's health at Miller's Ale House on Wednesday, March 19, 2025 in Orland Park. Cavanagh's bout with pancreatic cancer and subsequent treatment nearly ended his comedy career, and his life. (Jeff Vorva/Daily Southtown)



By **JEFF VORVA** | Chicago Tribune

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Tim Cavanaugh scared someone's poor dog in 2021.

And that was a good thing.

Cavanaugh, 71, is a nationally known comedian from Orland Park who at one time was backed up by Drew Carey, co-headlined with Dennis Miller and backed up Jay Leno and Jerry Seinfeld among others.

He opened 2021, however, being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on Jan. 2. He went through hell, having a bunch of internal organs taken out and spending 26 days in a hospital. But he survived a disease that, according to pancan.com, carries a survival rate of 13%.

That was the good news.

The bad news is that after he survived, his mind was a mess and wasn't sure he would ever be able to walk on stage and make people laugh again.

"I was feeling like a complete idiot," Cavanaugh said. "I used to be able to do this stuff easily.

"It was like, can I still do this? Am I still quick? Can I remember my jokes? I was like a crazy man."

He closed out the worst year of his life in early December performing a half-hour set that Dry Bar Comedy aired on YouTube.

Cavanaugh said when he was trying to get his confidence back, Northwestern Medicine psychologist Stacy Sanford told him that "affirmation" was a huge step in the recovery process.

He received plenty of that after the Dry Bar video ran. There were more than 100 comments and an overwhelming majority were positive.

A poster by the name of Shazam6274 said, "Hilarious! Many of the punch lines had me laughing out loud...(which scared my dog.)"

Others called him a "fun goofball," "intellectually superior" and "a brilliant comedic mind."

That affirmation allowed Cavanagh to plow ahead.

"It sounds sick and psychotic, but I needed that," he said of the positive feedback. "I needed to hear that and to put that in my head."

In February 2022, he did a corporate show in Nebraska that he had committed to before he was diagnosed with cancer, and warmed up with some 10-minute midweek shows at Zanies Comedy Club in Rosemont.

Cavanagh said he was terrified before those shows, but they went well. Soon, he was doing more shows and restoring his confidence back to normal. Now he is doing shows with ease.

The Orland Park funnyman has so many people to thank for his recovery but at the top of the list is his wife, Chris Barclay, who was with him at his worst times, including the monthlong hospital stay in which the man she knew as a vibrant, cheerful man was looking like near-death in a hospital bed.

He had Whipple surgery, in which the head of his pancreas, duodenum, gall bladder and 10% of his stomach were removed.

"He should have been out in six days, but his body wasn't processing," Chris said. "He looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy and lost 40 pounds. His body would not restart to process things. His lungs filled up with fluid and they had to put him on a respirator for two or three days."

After 26 days in bed, even re-learning to walk was an adventure for him, Barclay said.

But the couple was patient. Tim is cancer free, and he is killing it on stage.

He headlined Zanies in Rosemont on March 16 and many people in the audience were friends and some were former students from his pre-comedy days when he taught at Maria High School in Chicago.

"I was so looking forward to this show," he said. "It was a sizable crowd and I could name almost everybody. It went really, really well."

This year also found him opening for his friend Emo Philips, and a Feb. 22 show in Cedar Rapids affirmed to Cavanagh that working hard to come back was a pretty good idea.

“From top to bottom, it was the funniest show I’ve ever been a part of,” Cavanagh said.

Cavanagh is taking part in a cancer survivor’s walk and 5K for the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center on June 1 in Grant Park. He raised \$6,500 last year and wants to top that. To help his cause, visit nmgive.donordrive.com/participant/Tim-Cavanagh-2025.

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He is appreciative to be back doing what he loves best.

“I’m so lucky and happy that I’m back to being back to being where I was,” he said. “I got a second chance to pursue what I’ve always wanted to do ... let the laughter work its healing magic on my audience’s bodies and souls.

“And all the while letting it work on me, too.”

Jeff Vorva is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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