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THE NEEDIEST CASES

The Consequences of Surviving Throat Cancer at 37



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Peter Broomfield at the town house of a sister in Brooklyn, where he lives in the basement.

By [KARI HASKELL](#)

Cancer of the throat took away Peter Broomfield's natural voice. "I sound like a robot," he said, pressing the tiny microphone-like instrument, called a Servox, against his neck above the trachea. A listener can slightly imagine how his Caribbean accent sounded before the cancer operation in 1990 that removed his larynx.

He is 56, a native of Jamaica, but he has not lived there since he was 17. He remembers little more than the cool water that splashed on him in the ocean. He loved to fish, he said, and dive off high rocks.

Now he cannot go swimming. If water covers the hole that he breathes through, called a stoma, he could drown.

His cancer was most likely a result of smoking, a habit he took up at 15 and has hidden from his mother to this day, he said. "She still doesn't know. She was very strict."

Her rules were clear: "Go to school and get an education." All but one of his seven siblings came with her to New York to fulfill that ambition, he said. One brother went to Columbia; a sister went to nursing school.

But Mr. Broomfield says he was the black sheep in the family. "I didn't go to college. I always worked," he said. Working as a bike messenger, he went all over the city.

"I made money, and it was good," he said.

Later he had a job involving data entry.

He punched keys at night, and spent days at the racetrack. On weekends, he socialized with friends and went to parties. Gambling on horses kept him out of trouble, he said; he never lost more than his limit. He won on occasion, but it was the adrenaline rush, not the money, that kept him going back.

At 35, he decided to settle down and was married. But not long after, he felt a pain in his throat that turned out to be cancer.

His daughter, Althea, was born the same year that he underwent surgery to remove his larynx. She has never heard him speak her name without his microphone.

He has not worked since he was 37, the year of his surgery. He tires quickly because his breathing is limited. His marriage, though he is not divorced, began to fall apart. It has been several years since his wife and daughter have lived with him.

He can afford to live in the basement of a sister's town house in Flatbush, Brooklyn. He pays \$500 for rent, including utilities, from his \$811-a-month disability check. In the winter he stays in his bedroom, where it is warm, and watches television. The rest of his disability payment goes for food (\$200), and \$93.50 is taken out to cover [Medicare](#).

At the end of each month, he has nothing left. This past Christmas, he could not afford to buy his daughter a gift, he said, shaking his head, ashamed.

A few months ago, his voice box stopped working.

"I'd hit it," he said, demonstrating how he was trying to get it to work. On his limited income he could not afford a new one. His Medicare paid 80 percent, or \$630, but he did not have the remaining \$145.

A neighbor suggested he contact the Community Service Society, one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

"I never thought people could be so nice," Mr. Broomfield said. Santa Soriano, a social worker at the Society, provided the needed money from the Neediest Cases Fund.

"I am grateful; it really helped me a lot," he said.

Most of the people he meets now are not so kind, he said. "They just stare."

For those who still smoke, he has advice: Quit.

"If I could have sacrificed a little bit, I would be better off," he said. "What can I do now? I just want to live the rest of my life the best I can."