

UConn professor won't let cancer stop him

Steven Kalb is not a typical journalism professor. He wears a suit to class everyday. He's never written a lesson plan down. "It's not the way most people do things, but I've never done things that way," he said, sitting in front of a wall of televisions (his TV wall is used to play different news channels at the same time, just to see who's saying what). Kalb's philosophy of life is a little unconventional, but there is a method to all the madness.

At the age of 12, Kalb knew what he wanted to do with his life. He spent his evenings up late listening to Johnny Carson, and was confident that he wanted to work in radio. He didn't know how he'd get there, but his booming newscaster voice would definitely come in handy. A few months after high school graduation, he decided college was the natural next step. Two weeks before classes started, he toured Western Connecticut State University and even though applications had closed, he sweet-talked his way into enrollment.

His determination continued to take him far, earning him his first full time position soon after taking time off from college. "I figured the best way to find a job is when you don't have one," he explained. And he was right. After cold calling radio stations, one producer agreed to take him on, offering an entry level job that entailed many sleepless nights and very little pay. He accepted, willing to put in the work. At one point in his career, Kalb worked 40 hours just on weekends alone. His first job led to the next, until he ultimately made the shift into television broadcasting.

Kalb never expected to find himself back in a classroom, and certainly not playing the role of professor. He didn't apply for the position and had no formal training in education. Twenty-one years ago, he received a call from the UConn journalism department urging him to come in and teach a class. After just one semester, he received overwhelmingly positive student evaluations and was asked to stay, adding another class to his roster.

As many of his students can attest to, including myself, Professor Kalb is an unconventional instructor with a passion for sharing what he knows. That's what he truly cares about. When a student finally gets it. "I get to watch people wake up and go 'crap, this is a lot of fun.'" He doesn't feel the need to keep track of students' grades, as he says he knows how a student is doing without checking the gradebook. What can be taught to make these students better journalists? How can I help them *think* like a journalist? Those are the questions he asks himself.

In Fall of 2022, Kalb opened the final class of the semester by telling students to close their laptops and pay attention. All of the students obliged, entertaining his proposition. With a sense of urgency, Kalb picked up a green expo marker and began making a list on the whiteboard. He listed out phrases like "car payments" and "rent" with an estimated number next to it. He wanted

to make sure his students knew how to spend their money after graduation, on a \$30,000 starting salary. Taking questions as he went, he budgeted an entire year out, allowing his students to take a break from class content and learn an important life skill. Two things were clear: his students respect him and he respects his students.

Now, Kalb credits teaching for saving him when he needed it most. In 2017, he was diagnosed with small lymphocytic lymphoma, a chronic condition that targets specialized white blood cells. “After I got done being scared, I realized that teaching was going to be the mental out that kept me sane,” he said. He had no interest in allowing his illness to change any part of his life, and his relationship with his students was no exception. He taught and continues to teach through his chemotherapy treatment process, at one time even from a hospital bed. In his classic ambitious style, Kalb requested a room with wifi so he would be able to seamlessly hold classes online. “We don’t normally do that,” he was told by a hospital staff member, but quickly responded with: “I am not your normal patient.” Needless to say, his request was accommodated.

When he returned to the classroom, Kalb began using an opening line for students he hadn’t instructed before. He walks in, and comes out with it blatantly. “I have this sickness, and if for some reason I’m not here, this is why.” And then he moves on. He says he will not let a stupid thing like cancer get in the way of what’s important to him.

During the pandemic, however, Kalb remembers running into more challenges than ever before. “I was battling lymphoma, so I’m busy cracking down pills while trying to figure out how to do everything remotely,” he said. “Lots of classes you can move to being taught at home, it’s a whole different animal with television.” To remedy this, Kalb stressed the importance of live classes twice a week. He truly connects with his students, and once again did not want that element to be lost. He didn’t let that change when he was sick, so he treated this the same way. “It was a unique way to hold class,” he recalled, “but not impossible.”

Through it all, Kalb describes his personal and professional life with a sense of genuine gratitude. He believes that broadcast journalism is the best thing in the world, and is thankful that he not only got to work in it, but now gets to teach it. “It’s always been fun,” he said, “And it’s not over yet.”