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Scott: Hi! I'm Scottie Sandow.

Chris: And I'm Chris Gray.

Scott: Welcome to the Placer Life. Today, we like to present you of the story about, well, life. Justin Wages' life, to be exact.

Chris: Justin is land manager with the Placer Land Trust here in Auburn, more on them in just a minute, and he's a stage 4 cancer survivor. Cancer is an awful diagnosis for anyone. Justin was diagnosed in his early 30s without health insurance, and he's pretty much on his own dealing with a really bad prognosis.

Scott: Justin's story isn't just about survival though. It's also about a deep connection with Placer County's land and nature, and helping out in it helped him not only heal but thrive.

Chris: Just a quick note about the sound here before we start. You'll hear Justin breathing pretty deeply throughout this. It's not bad at all. You'll know why soon enough.

Scott: Let's begin.

Chris: Have you always been an outdoors lover?

Justin: Always. I remember 4th grade when the teacher tells you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", you do that little exercise. The first thing that came to mind is I wanted to be a forest ranger. I grew up on a farm, at least in the early years. Always played in creeks, catching crawdads and watching Steelhead migrate up from the Delta, this was in Fairfield, by the way. I just loved nature. I remember running around in our field trying to hunt pheasant with sticks. That was just what I did.

Scott: Despite finding his childhood kingdom outdoors, Justin's home life was pretty tough.

Justin: My father left when I was two. My mother had an issue with drugs, and was pretty much not there for me and my sister most of the time. It was my grandparents that mostly raised me. My mother ended up passing away. My grandmother passed away. I ended up living with my dad when I was in 6th grade, and he didn't really know how to handle the situation, or raise a kid. That was, I don't want to say abusive, but maybe mentally abusive, and I couldn't handle it.

Chris: When he was a teenager, Justin left his dad's place in Oregon, and moved in to a foster home back in Fairfield. It wasn't a great situation for a variety of reasons. Anyway, at an especially low point, Justin and a friend found themselves homeless, sleeping in a dumpster behind the Jelly Belly factory.

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- Justin: They had these great giant cardboard dumpsters, so it wasn't like a dirty, filthy, with food-type thing. These cardboard dumpsters, you could build up the cardboard. It was actually kind of warm. So we stayed out there for about a week and a half. Each day, they would throw out all their jellybeans. This is before they would sell the flops that they have, so they would actually put the jellybeans that weren't going to make it to market in another little small dumpster that wasn't very far away. So we would wait until everything died down at night, and then we would go stuff our pockets with jellybeans, and go to sleep in the dumpster.
- Scott: As rough of a start as it was, as he enters his late teens, Justin's straightens out of his life and starts thinking about his future.
- Justin: It wasn't until probably my late 20s that I realized I wanted to do something for nature, not just recreate in it and use it. I wanted to play some type of an active role in helping it. So my 1st degree was computer technology. I graduated just at the time the tech market kind of went bust, so that wasn't very useful. I decided to go back to school, and get a degree in fisheries biology just as a way to get into that field and actually make a difference for other users, especially young kids like myself who could grow up in a situation like that.
- Chris: At that point, at 25, you really felt like you needed to go back to school? Why the change? What prompted the redirection?
- Justin: I think a big part of it, well one, I needed to find a job. That's a big prompt right there. I had a little bit of money that I had inherited when my grandparents passed away. It wasn't much, but it was enough to help keep me afloat while I had little jobs, but I needed a career. I just figured, well let's go to community college. I needed to start at the basics again since I'm going in a different direction. And I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do other than the fisheries biology. But I wanted to do something. I needed more meaning in my life. If you've ever gone from having nothing, basically having to raid Goodwill drop-off stations just to get school clothes, to all of a sudden having more money than you know what to do with, the feeling of going from nothing to "I can buy a Lamborghini today if I wanted to," really messes with your head.
- I think I was the most depressed I'd ever been in my life when I had the money. That was kind of that turning point where I realized I need to do something that's a lot more fulfilling for me, and not necessarily just so I can buy a nice house or a nice car. And that's why I needed to go back to school and get educated in something that's going to be fulfilling lifetime.
- Chris: Pursuing that education, Justin moves to Lincoln and enrolls in Sierra College in Rocklin to study Fisheries Biology, or so he thought.
- Justin: I had to take an interesting class called Earth and the Human Impact. Joe Medeiros was teaching that class, and I started doing a lot of field trips with him and some of the other professors. It was really great to be exposed to these natural environment, and seeing what kind of an impact we have on it. Even more interestingly, how much of an impact

those natural places have on us, and really internalizing that. Yeah, it had such an impact that I decided to change my degree path from fisheries biology to ecology, because I really enjoy the way all these natural things were hitched together, and how one thing affects another thing. I started to really want to get into conservation in general, and less of the sporting aspect, and seeing how I can get involved with fixing these natural places that we've either mocked up or protecting them.

Once I started Sierra College, and going on these field trips, I couldn't help but fall in love. Even though we were going to other areas outside of the county, I was learning more about the flora and fauna, the geology, all of these things that just really make you appreciate where you're at. That's what really drove it home. I knew I wanted to stay here. I wanted to learn as much as I can about the area. I want to say it was ... I started doing internships for Placer Land Trust while I was at Sierra College.

Scott: Based in Auburn, the Placer Land Trust works with landowners and conservation partners to permanently protect natural and agricultural land in Placer County.

Justin: I was very lucky as I have somebody from the Placer Legacy Program that I had met doing Earth Day events and that sort of thing that got me in touch with the Land Trust, and getting me that internship. It's kind of funny it's going a little bit full circle here, so I thank the county for that immensely.

Chris: Placer Legacy is the county's open-space and habitat conservation program.

Justin: The more I learn about it, the more I got to protect these area, and see people who live here and people, especially who come and visit, get to utilize these spaces. Really it's fulfilling. It's great.

During that time, I was still trying to go to school. I noticed I was having issues with fatigue and just wasn't really feeling well. I didn't really know what it was. I didn't have health coverage. I couldn't afford it. I was taking advantage of county services as much as I could. When I realized that I needed something more, I couldn't get the coverage I needed to really diagnose what was going on.

The Land Trust knew something was going on, and they realized I needed help. They went the extra step and canceled my contract position, and actually hired me a full time so I could get the health stipend, so I could go and get health covered. I immediately went to Kaiser, they're in Roseville, got my health coverage, and then went in a month later to see what was wrong with me. And then that day, I was diagnosed, they found out a cancer tumor, and it was at least stage 3 at the time.

I didn't have a whole lot of ... actually I almost had no family in the area. So I just had a lot of friends. I didn't really know how to take it. It'd be one thing if you were a father with children and a wife, it may be a little bit harder. Being fairly self-sufficient and being on my own, it wasn't quite the mental hit I think it would be for a lot of people, but it was still tough. I want to say you listen to stories like this and people expect you to say you were hit like a ton of bricks or punched in the stomach, and that life is over, and

it's this big, deflating news. But I think because of the way that I grew up, I was constantly hit by family that was dying. I had my best friend, when we were in middle school, jumped in front of a train.

I just felt like I was constantly hit with bad news most of my life, so it actually didn't hit me as hard then as the normal story. I took it in stride, yeah, this is not good. But it was also kind of a progression. It started off, there might be a chance. You do the Google searches. They tell you not to. But you can't help it, you go and do the Google searches. What are the statistics? What are my chances of survival? Stage 3 maybe 10%. Well it's not very good. But again, I wasn't a family person at the time, and I thought well if that's it, that's it. It's my time. So I'm just going to use it, the time that I have to the best of my abilities to enjoy myself, and leave some kind of a lasting impact on my friends and anyone around me.

I remember one time, I think it was like 3:30, 4:00 in the morning, I was at the Land Trust office, and when it really hit me that, "Oh my gosh! There's so much I know about the properties I manage that's in my head that I don't have documented." Gosh! Whoever is going to replace me when I die is going to have to take care of these places.

I planted all these trees, or the way this creek is meandering. I got all these projects going, I'm going to have to document these, so somebody can come in and take over quickly. That one hit me pretty hard, at least for, probably a few days after that. And that was the first time I actually really cried. I was just sitting at the desk in the office, it's dark, because I didn't want to turn on all the lights and everything. I was just sitting at the computer, that was when I cried, because I thought, "Wow! This is real. I need to make sure everything is ready to go." It wasn't that I was dying per se, but "Oh-my-God! I have these things to take care of." I think maybe that's how someone who has children may feel that now they're leaving, and someone is going to have to take care of their legacy. For me, the legacy was the land.

Slowly, the news got worse, and it's spread to my liver. We did the liver resection surgery. They took a big chunk of that out. Thankfully, that actually regrows, so that was kind of neat to see the x-rays of the liver growing back. But there was spot on the upper left lobe of my lung, and that one they couldn't treat easily, and so they actually had to remove most of the left lung. That was the last major surgery I had, but that was also one of the most debilitating because it really affected my breathing, and my stamina, overall. One of the earlier surgeries where they had removed a large portion of my colon, and part of the rectal tissue really messed with your bathroom cycles, so I had a really hard time dealing with that. I had to wear an ostomy for about nine months.

Chris: Not to get too graphic here, but just so it's clear what he's talking about, an ostomy basically reroutes your waste through a tube out of your abdomen and into a bag that you wear around.

Justin: For some people that's really weird and kind of grosses you out, whatever. But that was nine months of dealing with that. You learn a lot of humility. I remember one time working with a girl scout doing her, I think it was her gold award project or her silver, doing bird boxes out on our Doty Ravine Preserve, and then out on our Big Hill Preserve,

particularly Taylor Ranch. We had this group of girl scouts out there, a few parents, and we're putting up these bird boxes, it's a really cool family experience for a lot of them, and then my ostomy broke open. I had to try to figure out a way to patch it up and not let them know what happened without grossing them out. It's those little things that you're like, "Okay, this is terrible, but you know what, I'm still here." And we didn't think I was going to be here. That was probably two and a half years into the treatment.

I'm here in nature. So here I am complaining and mad because this darn seal broke and it's nasty, whatever, but I'm behind and leaning up this magnificent oak. At the time, everything was really green. You just look around, I go, "This moment right now sucks, but look what we have around us. This moment is going to pass, this stuff is still going to be here. In an hour, I'm going to feel a lot better." So again, it was that nature healing.

I mean, I had to carry a chemo pump with me. You go and get the infusion, then they actually attach a line and a pump that's continually pumping more chemo until that two weeks is over. And so I can go out in nature and still do my job, and carry around this chemo pump. I might have to go around the corner and throw up, whatever needs to happen, but it was that constant immersion in nature that really helped me a lot. Pretty much during the entire treatment, which lasted about four years, I never got depressed. Yeah, there're sad moments but for the most part, just being able to be outside was fantastic. I think if I was in a big city or something where I was completely cooped up, it might have been a lot more difficult.

After that last surgery where they removed the lung, I assumed yes, that's going to take some time to rehabilitate. But what I found interesting was something as simple as bending over to tie your shoe, if I stood up too quick, I could pass out. And I had actually done that a couple of times. I thought I was supposed to be better now. Later eight months down the road and I can't do anything. My lactic acid build up in my forearms just trying to open a can with a can opener, I'd have to stop half-way through because I couldn't physically open the can. It would just burn as if I've just done 100 cans.

Around that time where I was fighting these physical limitations, that's when I started to really get down. Like I said before, you either think you're going to die or you're going to get cured. Or we don't use the word cure, but you're going to get better. And here I was finding that I'm going to constantly have these bathroom issues all my life, and I'm going to have to constantly live with a lack of oxygen and lactic acid build up, and getting winded even just climbing a short flight of stairs, then I got depressed. And that was real difficult. I didn't know how to deal with that. I sought treatment on that. Did the usual prescription drugs to try to help you out of it. Even that didn't really work; just made me kind of dull to life, just didn't find anything interesting. I didn't want to do anything.

At one point, I decided to start leading hikes for Kaiser Permanente. A friend of mine did their wellness program, and they have one where they take staff members out. I do runs, walks, that sort of thing, but I was interested in the hiking because I wanted to get people out in nature, and I wanted to give back to Kaiser. They really helped me grow all of my ordeals. They even had a great program that helped pay for a lot of the services I had beyond the coverage, because I was low income at the time. So I wanted to give back to them.

Climbing at the Donner Summit and a lot of these other great hiking places that we have here in the Sierra, and in Placer County in general; even trying to do Lake Clementine was killing me. I was finding I had to be really careful not to pass out, but it was helping. As time went on and the hikes got longer, and especially higher elevation, I was feeling better and better, so one of them made the recommendation, "We should try running." Of course, they are runner. I never really liked running before. I was more of like just a quick sprinter. I didn't like the long running aspect. Unless something is chasing me, there was no way I was running. I did try that, and I had some knee issues from snowboarding and those quickly flared up. I decided I didn't like running.

One of the other ones who's a cyclist, suggested I start cycling. I didn't want to do a road bike. I'm not really into lycra, they were super tight-fitting clothes, so I decided I wanted to do mountain biking.

I ended up buying a mountain bike. Rode that around a bit. I did Hidden Falls. Placer Land Trust was also building some of our own trails to eventually open to the public and get connected. One way to manage them is to actually ride on them and get some use. So I started riding our trails a lot, and realized, "Man, this is lot of fun!" I also noticed those little issues like opening a can of tomato sauce wasn't as bad. And I was getting better. Then the kind of younger old skate boarding kid self of mine was like, "When will we start doing jumps and riding fast?" So I ended up watching videos here in the Canyon and particularly, our Culvert Trail and Confluence, and that kind of got me jazzed up. I started meeting some of the local folks here, some of the mountain bike clubs that they have like Fat Track, and just what this county had to offer really started to get me excited about this whole other community that I had no idea existed out there.

Auburn is the endurance capital of the world, whether unofficial. I really didn't know what that meant when I was saying until I realized all of these different events that occur out here, in this just huge, massive user group of rafters, equestrians, hikers, runners, cyclist, it really opened my eyes. Here I was at the Land Trust for what five plus years, and even though I'm out in the countryside working on a lot of these, I had no idea of the recreation aspects, and the groups that come and utilize them from outside of the county until I started mountain biking.

Mountain biking, in general, to me in the beginning, at least, was just a way to get healthy. At least that's what it started off as, but it became so fun, and I can get to a lot more places faster on my mountain bike than I could hiking. So I found myself exploring more of the trail systems that we have here that I didn't even know existed, because normally, I wouldn't have been able to hike to them without spending an entire day. I used to say, "Oh, I want to go do a hike," well that means I got to go to Tahoe, or I have to go to the coast. I didn't realize all these trails were here. Getting on the bike and lugging those longer miles, I was getting my exercise, but I was also getting immersed in nature more than I thought I could have. You get out further, you see things that you have never seen before. You also get isolation in a lot of cases. So you stop your ride whether it's because you're winded, or maybe it's just time for a snack, or maybe because it's a beautiful vista.

I'm really into flowers too, I'll admit it. There's this great little flower growing that I'd never seen before, or maybe it's a picture moment. But then you stop, and you need to just listen. And there's silence. You know you're not that far from Auburn, but it's completely silent from human activity. To me, that's amazing. I think more people need to experience that, and that was one way I could do it. Whereas hiking, I'm limited to the first few miles or so. It's a really busy area. But getting out on the bike got me way further out to give me that kind of isolation that I really wanted.

Chris: Once you've gotten that pattern, timewise, when do you start feeling like yourself again?

Justin: I really started riding regularly in about May of 2015. Kind of getting used to it, I was feeling a little bit better, still wasn't great. But I remember, specifically, last summer, this was in 2016, where I was charging uphill, and it was the fire road that goes from Lake Clementine Road up to the beginning of Culvert Trail. And I hate climbing, it's another long-buster. A lot of people don't like climbing anyway. But I remember pedaling and go, "Oh God, here it goes." We got to go to pain before you get the pleasure, but it actually felt good. I was like I haven't been able to breathe like this, and even have this kind of athletic ability, and I don't even know how long.

I just pushed, and I just pedaled as hard as I could. I remember dropping gears instead of going up in gears to make the climb easier. I was putting it down to pick up speed. I didn't end up getting my best time on that climb. A lot of my friends are way faster on that thing, but to me, that was a major accomplishment. I went, "Wow! I haven't felt this good." I don't even know how long, and it wasn't just the physical. The emotional part kicked in, and I thought, "This has been here all this time. Why haven't I utilized it?"

Scott: As we launch this episode in September 2017, Justin is still cancer-free. He's in a great relationship. He's become something of a legend in the local mountain biking community. He continues to lead hikes and tours with the Placer Land Trust. And along with his girlfriend, he's heavily involved in mountain biking events for kids.

Chris: The healing power in nature that is so clear in Justin's story is one of the many reasons the Placer Land Trust is working so hard to preserve and protect these outdoor spaces for all of us. It's a wonderful organization. Placer County has been proud to partner with them on many land conservation projects including Hidden Falls Regional Park here in Auburn.

Scott: Conservation is also really important to Placer County. Places like Hidden Falls and Lake Tahoe are why people continue to move to Placer County, but we have a plan to balance that growth by permanently preserving tens of thousands of acres of open space and agricultural lands. It's called the Placer County Conservation Program. You can learn all about it on our website at [placer.ca.gov](http://placer.ca.gov).

Chris: Thanks again for joining us for this episode of the Placer Life. See you next time!

