

# One more challenge

*Only four years out of high school, Ohio State student **Chris Valentine** became president of the Dublin Board of Education. Then came bad news, and life got even more complicated.*

**by Alice Hohl**

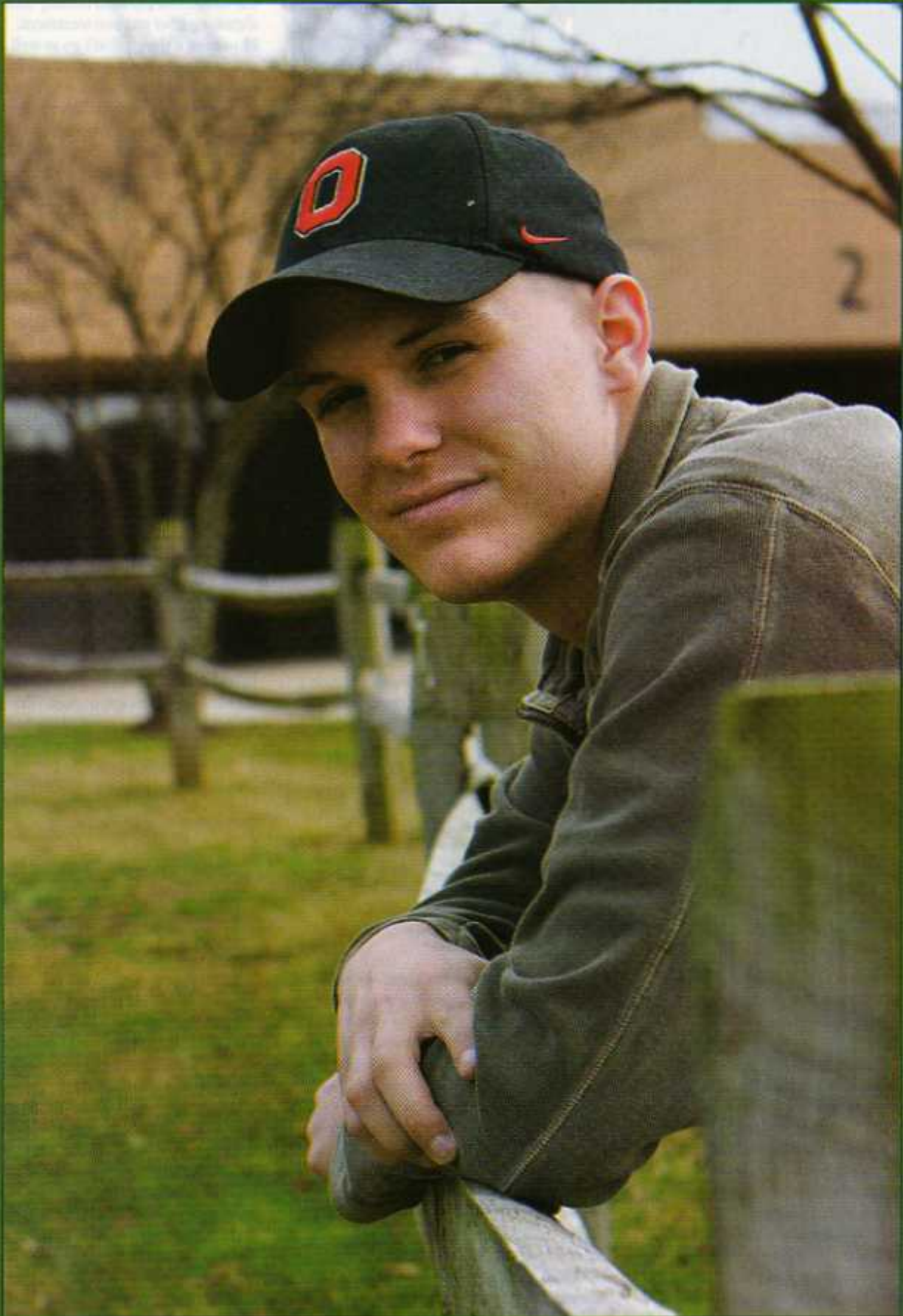
**C**hris Valentine calls the Dublin school board meeting to order and moves easily through the agenda. When a group of high school students and their teacher present a plan for turning French fry grease into fuel for school buses, most of the adults in the room are staring at the teacher or the slides projected on the wall. Valentine, however, is looking at the students, giving an encouraging nod.

It's not surprising. He is closer in age to the students than almost anyone else in the room.

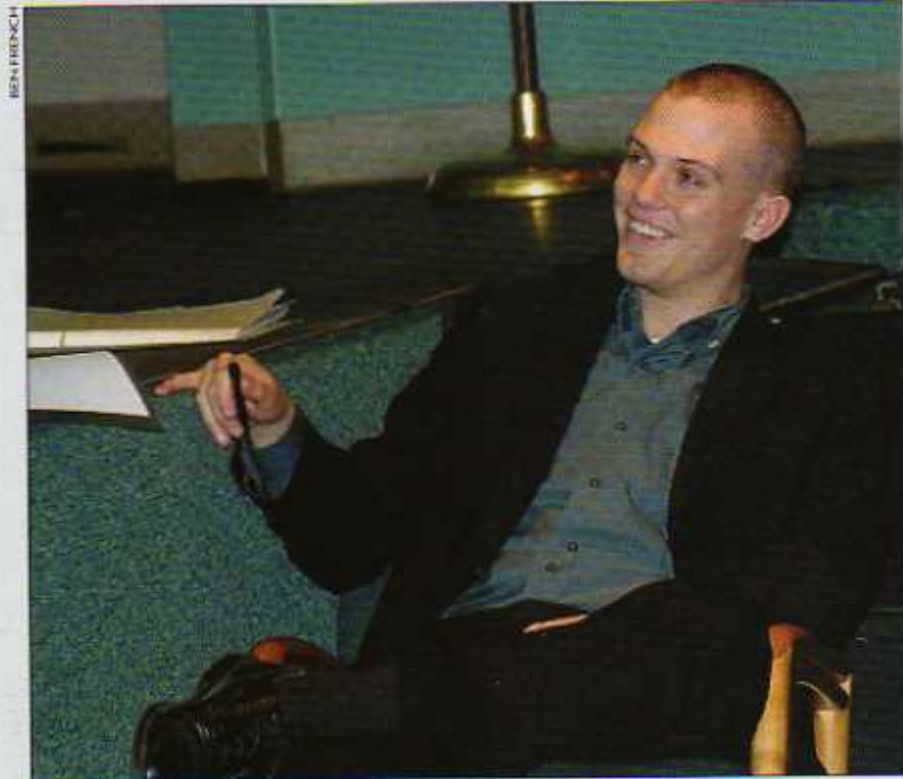
Valentine is 22 years old—a senior at Ohio State who graduated from Dublin Coffman High School just four years ago. The other board members are at least twice his age. But he's the one they call president. Yes, that kid who's barely old enough to drink is the head of one of the best school districts in the region.

Valentine is used to not acting his age. He won a school board seat when he was 19, travels the state building coalitions for a lobbying firm, serves as deputy director of grassroots efforts for the Ohio Republican Party and in his spare time runs the Dublin Travel Baseball organization. (He's also a coach, by the way.)

Lately the only time he feels out of place is when he's getting his chemotherapy treatment. In February,



Chris Valentine at his alma mater, Dublin Coffman High School.



Valentine, shown at a Dublin school board meeting in late March, won his seat in 2003.

Valentine was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system. During his weekly visits to the chemo clinic, he has to decide with which group of patients he wants to sit. In most cases, it's either senior citizens or middle-aged women. About other people his age with

for mononucleosis, diabetes and leukemia.

Then Valentine's doctor suggested a chest X-ray to look for signs of Hodgkin's disease, which strikes young adults more than any other age group. Valentine didn't need the results to confirm the doctor's hunch. "I looked it up online and at that

to infection. But in late March, Valentine said he was pleased that an X-ray showed the cancerous growths already were shrinking after just one treatment. However, if things don't go as well as his doctors hope, there could be additional chemotherapy or radiation treatments.

His mother, Sherrie Valentine, is a nurse, who worked in oncology before switching to the maternity ward. "It's great that I can be an advocate for him and maneuver us through the healthcare system," she says. "But in some ways I know too much."

She sits in a chair in the living room across from her son and her husband, Cliff, a lawyer. Chris has moved back into their Plain City house, where he and his brothers—Casey, 19, and Cory, 17—grew up. (Their home is in the Dublin school district.) While absent-mindedly petting one of the family's two dogs, Sherrie says it's been hard to accept the outpouring of help from the community. She's used to being the one who gives, not the one who gets. Sure enough, the doorbell rings and a woman drops off dinner and chats with Chris. The families of the baseball players on Valentine's team have signed up to bring over hot meals into July.

Before Valentine's chemotherapy started, the disease itself robbed him of sleep at night and forced him into bed for hours during the day to combat the chills. In his blog about his battle with cancer—[faithandcancer.blogspot.com](http://faithandcancer.blogspot.com)—Valentine describes Feb. 25, a particularly bad day:

**His mom, who checks her son's blog every day, says she's surprised when he says he feels good. "I see what he doesn't write," she says. "Sometimes he doesn't realize how bad he looks and how bad he feels."**

cancer, he says with a chuckle. "I know they're out there. They just don't go to the same doctor's office as me."

**B**efore his diagnosis, Valentine used to compress a full load of college classes into two days, work 30 hours a week for the lobbying firm and run practices for his baseball team, all while keeping an eye on the administration of the Dublin school district and preparing for the next board meeting.

In mid-January, just after being chosen as president by his fellow school board members, Valentine was stricken with severe flu-like symptoms for a couple of weeks. Drenching night sweats, fever and a meager appetite persuaded him to go to the doctor. The first tests came up negative

point I knew that's what I had," he says.

Hodgkin's is a cancerous growth of cells in the lymph system, the network of nodes and nearly invisible vessels the body uses to move infection-fighting white blood cells. In Valentine's case, the cancer appears to be isolated in his chest. Valentine says he's lucky the disease was diagnosed before it had spread to his organs (in particular, the spleen) and other lymph nodes.

His doctors have told Valentine, who's in the middle of a four-month set of chemotherapy treatments, that he has an 80 to 90 percent chance of wiping out the cancer completely—and never having a relapse. Valentine, though, will have to watch out for common illnesses, since the cancer-fighting drugs leave him vulnerable

"Last night, I struggled just taking a shower. At several points, I needed to put my hand up against the wall or squat to stop the dizziness. When I finished my shower, I even had to sit against the wall while brushing my teeth."

Now, the night sweats and fevers have disappeared for the most part. Instead, it's the poison pumped into him to fight the cancer that drags him down. He buzzed off his brown locks once his hair began to fall out. Despite his best efforts to eat well, his clothes keep getting looser. He dropped from 170 to 161 pounds in not quite two months.

Valentine plugs away, but his mom, who checks her son's blog every day, says

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she's surprised when he says he feels good. "I see what he doesn't write," she says. "Sometimes he doesn't realize how bad he looks and how bad he feels." And she still struggles with the fact that Chris has cancer: "What I've found lately is you leave here and you get back into work, get involved in what you're doing, and then suddenly you realize it's still there and it didn't go away." She forces a smile, but begins to cry recounting the first time she left her oldest child in the treatment room. "Is it tough to walk your son into a room full of patients and they're all getting chemo? Yeah."

While he's not happy about it, Valentine has cut back on his schedule: He's taking a leave of absence from work and dropping his classes at Ohio State (he's an education major, with hopes of becoming a middle-school social studies teacher). But he's still busy with baseball practices, his new passion (raising awareness and funds for cancer) and school board matters. During a Tuesday evening in March, he met with 20 or so parents who were concerned over a change in the school district's well-regarded special-education program. Although he looked haggard when the session started at 6 pm, he stayed until the parents had said their last piece three hours later.

Those who know Valentine don't doubt he'll overcome the disease. After all, he hasn't really failed at anything he's set his mind to yet. Well, except for the time he unsuccessfully tried to get his elementary school principal removed by circulating a petition. Valentine isn't a child prodigy who aced the SAT test or graduated high school at, say, age 9. He's a passionate guy who's a good student and works hard to make a difference. "He always had a logical reason for everything he wanted," his mom says.

And while he likes to have his fun, "He'll definitely be one to hole himself up in his room," says Pat Melton, one of Valentine's best friends and a former roommate. "We were having a New Year's Eve party and people were looking for him. I said, 'Well, go up there, he might be in his room.' And he was up there, just doing work." His classmates at Dublin Coffman voted him Most Likely to Become President of the United States.

His senior year in high school, Valentine was accepted as an intern in Gov. Bob Taft's office. "It definitely opened up doors for me that I wouldn't have had otherwise," he says. In college, Valentine hooked up with the OSU chapter of Young Republicans of America and took a



Doctors have told Valentine—pictured during a chemotherapy treatment—he has an 80 to 90 percent chance of eliminating the cancer completely.

job at Strategic Public Partners, a lobbying firm. He spent the summer of 2004 working with the Ohio Republican Party campaigning for George W. Bush across Ohio—and managed to arrange for one of his favorite teachers to shake hands with the president.

His political experiences came in handy when Valentine mounted his campaign to unseat an incumbent on the Dublin school board in 2003. Part of the family home was converted into a war room with a map of the district divided among volunteers. Valentine organized his brother's high school class, providing them "Vote Valentine" T-shirts to wear at public events. He enlisted friends of his

parents to host coffees or teas at their homes, inviting their friends and neighbors to hear him speak on district issues. He also used his connections at the Franklin County Republican Party to access its phone bank.

Still, he was just 19 years old, barely out of high school. "One of my biggest challenges was proving that I was a legitimate candidate—that I was taking this seriously," he says. So he researched the issues and, according to his estimate, knocked on 9,000 to 10,000 doors to engage residents in a discussion about his ideas.

He also pulled out a big gun: former OSU football coach Earle Bruce, whose



Valentine, who recently had shaved his head, with his parents, Sherrie and Cliff, and their two dogs, Candy (black Lab) and Codi (golden Lab).

grandson played sports with Valentine. (Bruce describes Valentine as someone "I dearly love and hope everything works out well for.") He agreed to appear at a fundraiser at the Country Club at Muirfield, which pulled in \$4,500, a good chunk of the \$7,000 Valentine collected for his campaign. It was more than any of his opponents.

Valentine sailed to a clear victory,

celebrating at the family home alongside volunteers and reporters. "This place was packed like the Hyatt," says Sherrie Valentine.

Why did he run? He points to a failed levy while he was still in middle school as the seed for his interest. As he began to follow school board news, he noticed most of it revolved around administrators and not the teachers, librarians, custodians

and other employees who were directly influencing students. "The folks who are in the trenches are the ones who make a difference," he says. "That's what stuck with me."

His first year on the board, he says, was "a learning experience. I spent a lot of time doing extra reading." Chris Mohr, Dublin's executive director of business affairs, says that's an understatement. Valentine had three meetings with Mohr before he was even elected. "He came in and would spend three to four hours with me talking about school finance," Mohr says. "I can tell when people start to glaze over when we're talking about rates and millage. After four hours, I was worn out. He never did glaze over."

"I was fortunate to have folks who didn't look at me as a 19-year-old, but looked at me as a fellow board member," Valentine says. "I wasn't just someone going out there speaking emotionally, speaking off the top of my mind. I was prepared. Through those methods, I was able to gain the respect of my fellow board members," he says.

Apparently, it worked.

Going into Valentine's second year, then-board president Tom Fries nominated Valentine to be vice president, and the rest of the board agreed. Valentine and Fries made for strange bedfellows, however. Fries had been a Democratic state representative and state senator in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, he took the young Republican under his wing. The two joked often during meetings about their opposing ideologies. "We would be talking about a free-lunch program or English as a Second Language ... and I would whisper to him, 'I'm gonna make a goddamn Democrat out of you yet,'" Fries says, laughing. "I don't hold out a lot of hope for that, but you never can tell."

After a majority of the five-member board decided not to run again—including Fries—Valentine and Mark Holderman were the only returnees. With his experience as vice president, Valentine won the board's unanimous vote to name him president.

So far in his two and a half years on the board, Valentine has helped the district hire a new superintendent (Linda Fenner), work out transportation and curriculum issues and pass a bond issue and a levy. Fenner acknowledges it's odd for her to

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have a 22-year-old boss. But both are at ease with the relationship, e-mailing a few times a week about district issues, talking on the phone and meeting twice a month to review the board meeting agenda.

"People didn't think of him as someone fresh out of high school because he's so good in the role of board member," she says. "He's a great bridge because he knows a lot about the social situations that occur in our schools. He knows what makes for a good educational experience. His perspective is really fresh, and it's a different perspective from what parents would have."

**S**herrie Valentine says one thing her sons have in common is a passion for baseball. Even one of the few feminine touches in the house—a decorative country-themed plaque on a kitchen cornice—reads "Field of Dreams." Sherrie and Cliff say they moved to Plain City so they could buy enough land for the boys to play baseball in the yard. Like his older brothers, Cory plays the sport for his high school team.

Chris Valentine wasn't ready to give up baseball when he graduated from high school. He became assistant coach under his dad for the Dublin Green Sox traveling team for boys born in 1994. He quickly took over as manager. Now his dad and another father, Rick Martin, are the assistant coaches. "We show up and he tells us what to do," Martin says. As director of Dublin Travel Baseball, he keeps a website updated for all the coaches and coordinates annual tryouts.

Because of cancer symptoms, Valentine had to spend a few indoor practices sitting in a chair, too weak to stand. But on a Sunday in mid March he wanders around the auxiliary gym at Dublin Jerome High School, apparently unconcerned about being clocked in the head by an errant baseball. After directing several throwing and catching drills, Valentine paces off a ball diamond in the gym, arranges the bases and presides over a scrimmage that involves pitching, catching and running, but no batting due to the space constraints.

A young player wearing a Lance Armstrong bracelet gets a high-five from him after a good play. A few minutes later,

Valentine shakes his head in frustration at players who can't remember the meaning of his long series of hand signals. "C'mon now," he shouts. "That's why you need to know your signs before you get to practice."

"He's a big brother to them," Martin says. "A lot of the boys have talked about shaving their heads for him. That's how much he means to them."

**V**alentine says he's decided there's a reason he has cancer. He just doesn't know what it is yet. He has worked with cancer organizations, lending his organizational skills to their events, and he plans to talk to Dublin students about cancer and his public service. He's agreed to chair the Dublin Relay for Life, an overnight event to raise money for the American Cancer Society. His openness about the disease has caused others to share their stories about battling cancer with him. Meanwhile, a friend is organizing a charity golf outing in Valentine's honor, and in March the school board voted to set up an account to collect funds for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society in his name.

Most 22-year-olds aren't exactly hard-wired to take their mortality seriously. Chris has no choice now. His prognosis is good, but he's battling a deadly disease. There are times when he thinks about the people in the chemotherapy room whose chances aren't as good as his. It makes him understand why his mom gets upset.

"My faith and my support system have been my bedrock," he says, referring to his deep religious commitment. "There came a point when I realized it was out of my hands and I was going to have to rely on my faith and the folks around me. I'm at peace that when my time has come, I'm ready to go where I'm going."

After some thought, though, Valentine says he wants to clarify his statement. "Before this battle, I was always planning ahead. I am very forward-thinking and goal-oriented," he says. "I am still that type of person." ■

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