

Project: Chuck Walton – Survivor Story
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Survivor Story

Almost Always Fatal

Not many people can laugh their way through cancer. But Chuck Walton did. He even wrote a book about it. Titled “Almost Always Fatal (Surviving Cancer With a Sense of Humor),” the book takes the reader on a surprisingly funny foray into the world of stage four metastatic melanoma, which, Chuck is fond of saying, “is almost always fatal.”

Those three words, in fact, make regularly scheduled appearances throughout the book – and for good reason. When Chuck learned he had cancer, like most people he went online to do some research. One of the first things he found was that his cancer is, you guessed it, almost always fatal. Those words were repeated by a succession of doctors – until he arrived at the Center for Cancer Care in Goshen.

Chuck’s story began in 1986 when he noticed an oddly shaped, dime-sized pigmentation on his calf.

“It looked like Florida,” he said. A doctor who examined it wasn’t worried, so neither was Chuck. Eighteen years passed, and by this time flat Florida had grown into “Texas with a mountain range” and was about the size of a nickel. At his wife Kathy’s insistence, Chuck saw a dermatologist in South Bend, who promptly took a sample and sent it to a lab.

The dermatologist’s suspicions were confirmed: advanced melanoma. So began a two-year ordeal during which Chuck had two surgeries to cut out the tumor, graft his skin and remove all the lymph nodes in his leg.

At that time, Chuck and Kathy owned a small trucking business and had no health insurance. With bills piling so high he needed a “24-foot extension ladder to reach the top,” Chuck and Kathy lost their business, their home and even their dog. Chuck said, “It sounds like a country song, doesn’t it? Did I mention that I lost my pick-up truck, too?”

Unfortunately, the cancer returned. Completely by chance, Chuck found out about Dr. Douglas Schwartzenruber, surgical oncologist and medical director at the Center for Cancer Care. He called for an appointment and got in the next day. And it was there that the tide began to turn.

After examining Chuck’s leg, Dr. Schwartzenruber explained a relatively new therapy called IL-2. In fact, Dr. Schwartzenruber is an internationally recognized authority on high-dose IL-2 for the treatment of metastatic melanoma.

Chuck recalled, “Dr Schartzentruber didn’t pull any punches. He told me that the chance of the therapy being 100 percent effective was about 6 percent. But he instilled confidence and what he didn’t say was that stage four melanoma ‘is almost always fatal.’ He knew there was hope and that the negative was not what I needed at this point.”

IL-2 therapy involves injecting patients with massive doses of interleukin-2, a protein produced in the human body that activates the cells that hunt and attack abnormal cells, such as cancer. Dr. Schwartzenruber explained that IL-2 doesn’t cause the good cells to be destroyed along with the bad, like some conventional cancer treatments.

"I liked the sound of that," Chuck said. "Dr. Schwartzentruber took the time to make sure we understood the process and that none of our questions went unanswered. Kathy and I both felt good about this guy, like I was finally in good hands."

In August 2005, Chuck was admitted to the intensive care unit at Goshen General Hospital. He received 10 doses of IL-2 that week. Over the next four months, Chuck had an additional five weeks of IL-2 therapy. In early 2006, tests showed that Chuck's melanoma had been eradicated. "That was wonderful news," he said.

However, 11 months later, the melanoma had again returned. But Chuck remained optimistic. "I'm not in the 6 percent that have had their melanoma completely wiped out due to IL-2, but I am in the 13 percent who benefit from having a heck of a lot of it wiped out," he said.

In his book, Chuck comments, "There is no doubt in my mind that without the IL-2 and Dr. Schwartzentruber and the Center for Cancer Care, the cancer would have spread to my vital organs long ago and I would not be writing anything right now, let alone this book."

With his trademark passion for positive energy and belief that laughter is the best medicine, Chuck no doubt will continue writing his story for a long time to come.