

THE PATIENT'S VOICE

My cancer journey

John McClelland



About 3 years ago, my wife Patty and I decided to take a vacation in Florida. I had a career that I enjoyed deeply, working in a management position for a trust company in suburban Philadelphia, but I was tired and had lost a noticeable amount of weight recently. I thought a vacation was a good idea. Patty and I had a great time in Florida, but when we returned home, I knew for certain that something wasn't right. I still felt tired, and as time passed, my weight loss became more and more noticeable. Then, one day—that turning-point day—I saw blood in my stool. My physician sent me for a colonoscopy. Patty was at my side when I woke up from the test. The doctor came in and told us that I had colon cancer. Our world of happiness and success crumbled at that moment. Patty and I were devastated. I was 48 years old and, until that moment, had always been in great health. Together, in June 2007, Patty and I began my cancer journey.

I went to Bryn Mawr Hospital, part of the Main Line Health System, in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, for surgical removal of the cancer in my colon. After the surgery, we were told that the cancer had also spread to my liver. My diagnosis was stage IV colon cancer. I knew I would need to fight hard, but I also knew I would not be alone. The oncologists, nurses, social workers, and technicians at Bryn Mawr Hospital would provide great support. These dedicated people, my medical team, would put me at the center of care.

I began chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and my oncology nurses embraced me with

education and support. I fought hard to meet the challenges of the illness as well as to deal with the many side effects of treatment. Through the months and now years of difficult cancer treatments, my nurses seemed heroic—always listening, always supporting, encouraging me, advocating for me, and providing me with excellent medical treatment.

Despite treatment, however, the tumors in my liver continued to grow. Patty and I decided to continue the fight by emphasizing palliation rather than aggressive therapy. We wanted to share our lives together in the best health possible. Also, feeling inspired by the dedication of my medical team, I wanted to become an advocate for colon cancer awareness.

I began to serve Bryn Mawr Hospital as a member of both the cancer and bioethics committees. As I approach the end of my life and confront the issues that raises, I share my thoughts and experiences with nurses who are training for management positions. I collaborate with nurses and members of multidisciplinary teams to discuss cancer care. Soon I will speak to about 100 students at Villanova University nursing school, sharing my cancer journey.

Despite the pain and sadness, despite my awareness that cancer will take my life, I have learned that with great people by our side, we can feel tremendous hope and love that empowers us and lifts us up. My oncology nurses are talented and dedicated, extraordinary and heroic. I am so very grateful for their care, as well as for the care provided by my entire medical team at Bryn Mawr Hospital. ■

John McClelland is undergoing treatment for stage IV colon cancer at Bryn Mawr Hospital, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.