

It all started with a routine trip to the Doctor. I was having knee problems, and wanted to get an oddly shaped mole removed from my back. So my Doctor removed the mole and said he would send it for tests. At this point I had no worries about what the outcome would be; cancer was barely part of my vocabulary. About a week later on Friday, October 13th, 2006 I received a phone call from the Doctor's office, saying they needed to see me. I started asking questions and they kept saying they needed to see me. Finally they put my Doctor on the phone and he proceeded to tell me that the mole from my back was a Malignant Melanoma, the deadliest type of skin cancer. My Doctor suggested that I come in and we could talk about what needed to be done. I went to the office later that afternoon. We discussed what the next several steps would be and then decided on a plan of action for surgery and oncology care. I chose Dr. Steven Brand as my surgeon. Dr. Brand was to perform a wide excision on my back where the mole was removed, and a lymph node biopsy (cancer sometimes spreads through your lymphatic system). He would send the lymph nodes to pathology for testing while I was in surgery. If pathology reports showed cancerous cells he would take the whole set of lymph nodes for further evaluation. If there were no cancerous cells in the biopsy, they would conclude surgery. There was a possibility that the biopsy could show a false negative, and further testing would show involvement.

Surgery was scheduled for October 31st. After pre-operative tests including CAT and PET scans, there was no sign that the cancer had spread. The morning of surgery a radiologist performed a lymph scintigraphy. This exam would show the sentinel lymph nodes, meaning the closest set of lymph nodes to the mole. They injected a radioactive isotope around the site where the mole was removed. The tests showed activity around the area of my left axillary (or underarm). Dr. Brand successfully removed the area around the site of the mole, and performed the biopsy which showed no involvement.

A few days post surgery I received another call that further testing showed minimal involvement in the lymphatic system. I would need to go back for surgery on Friday, November 3. They removed 16 lymph nodes, of those 3 contained cancerous cells. My surgeon had done all he could do, and now it was time to work with an Oncologist to find the best treatment for my situation.

My wife Betsy works for the National Cancer Institute so she was able to get a lot of information from dependable scientists in the cancer field. We looked into doing clinical trials but I either did not qualify or they just didn't suit my situation. The only other 2 options were to do nothing or start an immune therapy, Interferon. I went to Dr. William Sharfman at Johns Hopkins to get a second opinion. Dr. Sharfman suggested the Interferon would be beneficial

given that my overall health was good and the chance for recurring melanoma is high. Now it was time for me to decide. I chose to go with the Interferon. Interferon is a man-made copy of a protein that is produced by the body in response to infection. It helps the immune system fight disease and may slow or stop the growth of cancer cells by making the cancer cells too weak to protect themselves from the immune system. The duration of my Interferon treatments will be one-year. The first 20 days I received a high dose through an IV. Over the next 48 weeks I will give myself an injection under the skin 3 times a week. Side effects from Interferon vary between individuals. Along with fatigue, my biggest side effect was a severe headache. Once controlled with medication headaches are tolerable. I also developed slight depression and was put on medication to help with that.

Life has gotten a lot better in these past couple of months, I am now through with the intravenous therapy, I no longer need to take the anti-depressant, started my injections, and I am feeling a lot better. Although my life will never be the same as it was on October 12, 2006 I have faith that this hurdle will be behind me January 8, 2008, My last injection of Interferon. I would like to take this time to say "Thanks" to all who expressed concern, and a special "Thanks" to the entire Greens Staff at Bethesda Country Club for their support.

Troy Brawner, Assistant Superintendant, Bethesda Country Club



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