



Gary rings the gong

By Lisa Larson

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It's a celebration nobody really wants the chance to have, but when it's your turn, you're so grateful the time has arrived.

When Gary Howe of Cedar City finally had his turn to ring the gong signaling the end of his cancer radiation treatment, he wanted his enthusiasm to ring out loud and strong.

Although he was excited about the tradition, when Gary noted the tabletop sized gong provided at the Southwest Cancer Center in Cedar City, he simply said, "That is not a gong, that's a toy."

Fortunately for Gary, his son, Joseph Howe, works in the percussion department at Southern Utah University and was able to bring a full-size instrument to match the happiness the Howe family feels.

"It's exciting. I'm just glad he's getting to this point," Joseph said.

With the sound of the gong reverberating in the wind, hugs and congratulations were exchanged between Gary, his family and the medical staff, marking the end of one phase of Gary's life and opening another.

"Small celebrations are hugely important," Cheryl Bellomo, oncology nurse navigator, said of the gong ringing, as well as ringing the bell when chemotherapy patients complete their treatment. "It's a long process. It's huge to say, 'I'm getting back to normal,' even if it's a new normal."

For Gary and his wife Caroline, "normal" was disrupted almost one year ago.

The diagnosis

After experiencing severe stomach pain, Gary Howe went to the emergency room just after Thanksgiving 2017 because he was starting to turn yellow. Tests revealed a tumor was squishing the bile duct, causing Gary's symptoms. The root of the problem was two words he didn't expect to hear: Pancreatic cancer.



"I didn't grasp the severity of it," Gary said. "All along I just kept saying, 'this will just take a little while.' Yet here it's been almost a year."

Within that year Gary has endured six rounds of chemotherapy over 13 weeks, followed by surgery, then more chemo, then radiation. With all the sickness and side effects associated with each of these treatments, it's little wonder Gary's enthusiasm for the gong ringing knows no bounds.

Even with the celebration, however, Gary's happiness is tempered by the reality of his future. A PET scan in a couple of weeks to hopefully show the cancer is gone; then follow-ups every few months.

Through it all, Gary and Caroline have tried to remain optimistic.

"They're smart enough not to tell you too much," Gary said of his prognosis. "You learn to read between the lines."

He knows pancreatic cancer typically carries with it a weighty reality, but he's encouraged by the comments from one particular surgical oncologist in Salt Lake City.

"We're going to get this one," Gary said, recalling the oncologist's words. "Pancreatic cancer... we lose a lot of people to that one but we're going to get this one."

"Maybe they caught it early enough," Gary said.

Life before and after

For anyone who has ever been to the annual sheep parade in Cedar City, you've caught a glimpse of how Gary is spending life in retirement.

After graduating from Brigham Young University in horticulture in 1977 and receiving a business administration degree from SUU in 1985, he's had a variety of lines on his career resume. Through it all though, he and his family live on a sheep ranch, so no matter what else is going on in life, there is always plenty of work to do. Even when you're fighting cancer.

"I don't know how people going through these treatments hold down a job," Gary said. "I know there are plenty of people who do, but I couldn't have done it."

Relying heavily on his family, Gary and his wife say they've managed to survive, even the busy and stressful lambing season. They both exude a certain amount of pride when they talk about the way their seven children and their families have stepped forward to carry the load.

"Hopefully we can get to the point where we can pay them back little bit and support them in their needs," Gary said.

For example, traveling to witness baptisms, musical performances and more for each of their nearly 25 grandchildren is at the top of Gary's recovery plan.

The other thing Gary says he's really missed is the county fair.



"I love fairs. I love flea markets. I love to go shopping. I love to see what's new," Gary said.

His wife laughs and nods that Gary is definitely the shopper in their relationship.

Quality care

Despite the harrowing experience of the last year, Caroline said they have both been so grateful for the quality of care Gary has received at every level.

"I've been so impressed with their caring," Caroline said. "I've never felt like we were a bother."

Speaking specifically about the Southwest Cancer Center in Cedar City, both Gary and Caroline agreed it was such a blessing to receive treatment so close to home.

"It's just a happy place to be... if you didn't have cancer," Caroline said.

One of the people making sure Gary and other patients receive the best care possible is Cheryl Bellamo, the oncology nurse navigator.

Following a cancer diagnosis there is so much to process. In addition to the emotional and physical toll, there are medical appointments, treatments, physicians, follow-ups and more. It can be overwhelming. That's where Cheryl steps in as an advocate and educator for the patient and their family throughout the entire process.

"Our patients become part of our family," Cheryl said. "We focus on making patients as comfortable as we can, but also taking care of patients as people."

It can be a tough job. But seeing patients like Gary celebrate by ringing the gong make the difficult days a little easier.

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