



## **TEAMWORK: How a young family takes it day by day while mom fights terminal cancer diagnosis**

Not everyone can joke about cancer — in fact most of the time it's simply not a laughing matter. But almost five years into a terminal cancer diagnosis, humor is one of the ways Mike and Hollie Kelly cope.

"We've had many (wedding) anniversaries in the hospital," Mike says of the years since his wife's diagnosis. Then he added, with a laugh, "It's

great because you can always find flowers in the gift shop."

Levity, as it turns out, seems to be a hard-won, conscious choice. The couple's journey with cancer started with a biopsy in 2008, at the exact same time they found out Hollie was expecting their second child. When the biopsy revealed it was breast cancer, Hollie's doctor advised them to abort the pregnancy. "But there was no way we were doing that," says Hollie. "We knew in our hearts we were going to do all we could to save the baby." The couple determined not to have the cancer surgery until after the first trimester, and then Hollie went through a specialized chemotherapy during her second trimester that was designed to try to best prevent adverse effects on her unborn child. But knowing that didn't make the emotional toll on Hollie any easier. "I cried after every chemo treatment," she says. "I was so worried about the possible negative impact on my baby I wasn't even really thinking about the fact I was battling cancer."

Ultimately, Hollie delivered a healthy baby boy in March of 2009 and shortly after that her cancer was declared in remission. Then, on October 6, 2011, came devastating news. Not only was the cancer back, but now it had spread to her liver and brain. The word "terminal" swirled around Mike and Hollie as they attempted to make sense of what this would mean for them and their young family.

"At first, we were totally devastated, stunned," says Mike. "But then after some time, it became apparent this was now our 'new normal' and so we'd just take it one day at a time." That one day at a time has now added up to almost five years of regular cancer treatments for Hollie. How does this husband and wife team deal with that kind of reality? As it turns out, they have great examples of strength and patience in their children. "Our children have just been angels through all this, just angels," says Mike. "I remember even when our daughter was little, maybe two, and it was a difficult day for Hollie, and I came home from work and my daughter said, 'Mommy was sick, so I just played quietly.' Even at their young ages they are so kind and helpful and strong. To see how they stay happy and hopeful reminds us we can do that too."

But of course, the reality remains that the cancer Hollie battles has that awful word "terminal" tacked on to the end of it, and Hollie says "Mike and I worked very hard to be honest with our children without frightening them. They know cancer kills people, but they also know that everyone is going to die some day. So when the kids ask us if mom is going to die, we tell them the truth: 'We don't know, but not today.'"

For almost the last five years, Hollie has been undergoing infusion chemotherapy treatment every three weeks. She has two of the treatments at Cedar City Hospital's cancer center, a not-for-profit cancer



center recently named Intermountain Southwest Cancer Center at Cedar City Hospital, and then travels to Huntsman Cancer Center in Salt Lake every third time she needs treatment. Those treatments have been keeping the cancer from growing or spreading, for now. The possibility remains that Hollie could become resistant to the treatments, but she chooses not to focus on that. "When the doctor told us about one of the tumors in her body, it was described as 'golf-ball sized,' Mike says. "My response was panicked, like, 'It's golf-ball sized!' Hollie's was calm, like, 'It's only golf-ball sized.' Hollie is the eternal optimist. It's a great example to our kids, and to me, when we have to do hard things. It's like, 'If mom can do it, you can do it.'"

Mike works as a videographer for Leavitt Insurance, and Hollie recently took a 15 hour a week job with the Iron County School District as a preschool bus aide, to help meet their insurance deductible and expenses that come with the ongoing and indefinite cancer treatments. But one thing you notice immediately about both Mike and Hollie is while they work very hard and live an extremely modest lifestyle, they are filled with gratitude for every blessing they have, and have a stark lack of self-pity and despair. "It's a hard life but we really have the best life," Hollie says. "We're very blessed."

Mike echoes Hollie. "We have been so grateful to our families, our church, community, to the hospital," says Mike. "They have been there for us every step of the way. It's not an easy road, and sometimes it's hard not to be discouraged. But then we look around and see just how blessed we are, to have each other, our beautiful children, a good home. Even just the simple things of getting to be together, watching Netflix and just enjoying the moment, is a great blessing."

Maybe the biggest blessing though, is the fact that as they continue to take each day as it comes, they have the most beautiful kind of team there is: each other.



There are programs available that can help young families who are battling cancer. To learn more about those programs, or how to support those programs and the not-for-profit Intermountain Southwest Cancer Center, contact Cedar City Hospital oncology navigator Cheryl Bellomo at (435) 868-5685.