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REFLECTIONS *of a journey*



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Lee Belmas

As Lee Belmas continued to think of ways or tests that could give him a better prognosis, his doctor kept confirming his fears saying, “No, it’s cancer.”

“When you hear the word cancer it blows you out of the water,” Belmas said. “Right away you think you are going to die the next day.”

Belmas was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis in 1996, which eventually led to primary sclerosing cholangitis, a disease of the bile ducts. In September 2006 doctors discovered a malignant tumor and diagnosed Belmas with cholangiocarcinoma, cancer of the bile ducts.

After the diagnosis, Belmas started chemotherapy treatments 24 hours a day, five days a week for five weeks, along with radiation treatments twice a day, five days a week for three weeks.

His strong Christian faith would be tested again as he developed a blood infection that resulted in another hospital stay. Exploratory surgery later revealed the cancer was confined to his liver, which meant he was eligible for a liver transplant, his only hope for survival.

“I always thought I was a strong Christian before all this, but my faith went up to another level,” Belmas said. “We (his family) said a lot of prayers and without my faith in Jesus Christ, I never would have gotten through it.”

Without the transplant, Belmas’ doctors at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics gave him two to three months to live.

It was three weeks from the day of the exploratory surgery when a liver became available. Prior to that he got so sick he couldn’t eat. He lost 44 pounds during that time frame and when he heard the great news that he would receive a donated liver, he was too weak even to dial the telephone to call his family.

“My transplant coordinator came to my room at 2:30 in the morning to tell me that they had a liver for me and that I should be the one to call Fran (his wife), but I could barely lift the phone and couldn’t even dial,” he said. “I did speak with her, though, and shared the good news.”

He received a liver transplant on January 31, 2007 during a six-hour surgery. Two days after the transplant he began to feel better and started to eat again. Hospitalized for a total of 46 days, it took only nine days after the transplant before Belmas went home.

All the trips to Madison and time spent

in hospitals took a toll on his family, but Belmas said his son Brad remained the most positive throughout the whole ordeal. Fran, Brad, his daughter Melissa and her husband Ben stood by him through everything, along with many relatives and friends.

The Belmas family was not alone. To support them with their bills and other expenses, his hometown church in Ironwood, Mich., and all the Wausau area Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

congregations held fundraisers. People sent hundreds of cards while Lee was in the hospital and at home recovering.

“That was amazing and meant a lot to know so many people cared,” Belmas said. “Every trip to the mailbox meant a lot to me. All the cards we received were like hope in an envelope.”

Today, the 58-year-old enjoys being outdoors, fishing and working at the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod – North Wisconsin District Office in Wausau. He even got to experience the birth of his first grandchild, Lauren Frances, something he calls a special blessing.

