

COURAGE, LIFE & HOPE

# REFLECTIONS *of a journey*



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CANCER CENTER

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## Tom Jacob

Tom Jacob used to have a poster that he got from some catalog he had during his tenure as a biology teacher in the DC Everest school district. The poster depicts a heron with a frog in its mouth. But instead of going quietly, the scrappy frog is reaching out and choking the heron.

“It says Don’t ever give up,” Jacob said. “That’s kind of been my motto.”

That attitude has served him well, because he’s bucked the odds ever since he was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia in January 1996.

“I remember after I was diagnosed, we went to eat breakfast,” he said. “My wife and two daughters were with me. I looked at the sunrise and thought, ‘I wonder how many more of these I’m going to see.’”

At the time, the number of treatment options was limited, and physicians estimated his life expectancy to be three to five years. And although he retired early from full-time teaching, Jacob didn’t hang up his red pen. He continues substitute teaching to this day. The disease is being controlled by a combination of things: Prayer and excellent health care.

“I’m a strong believer in doctors, but I’m also a strong believer in God and the power of prayer,” Jacob said. “Between the doctors and the prayer, I think that’s why I’m talking to you. I should have been dead a while ago.”

Treatment for leukemia has taken Jacob on a winding tour of tests and experimental medications. Some have taken a physical toll on him, leaving him weak and tired. He has had several bone marrow biopsies and, at one time, a bone marrow transplant was considered. But currently, a drug called Gleevec is controlling his leukemia better than anyone could have hoped.

Gleevec is one of a new type of chemotherapy drug that zeroes in on abnormal proteins that are fundamental to the cancer itself. It is designed to target cancer-causing molecules, eliminating cancer cells without harming normal cells. As a science teacher, Jacob understands the drug’s function; as a cancer patient, he considers it a miracle.

Overall, cancer hasn’t changed a lot of what Jacob does. Over the past nine years, he’s skied the Birkebeiner six times and still enjoys cycling.

Cancer has, however, given him a greater appreciation for the things he is able to do, and for the people around him.

“It makes you think about life a lot more than you would otherwise,” he said. “It brings you up to the edge. I had a lot of good friends that prayed for me – a lot more friends than I thought I had.”

