

Gift of life

Bend couple turns cancer diagnosis into new lifestyle, cause

By Alandra Johnson / *The Bulletin*

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When Bend resident Gary Johnson awoke from surgery in November 2004, the first thing he recalls is asking his doctor, "Did you remove my prostate?"

The answer was no.

Gary knew what that meant. His cancer had spread.

"I knew at that moment, there's no cure."

Gary's doctor told him there was little Gary could do to help the cancer.

But Gary, 60, and his wife, Marlys, 55, have found ways to improve their lives together.

Gary asked himself: "OK, what can we do for me to live as long as possible and as well as possible?"

Now, the couple has found renewed energy and purpose in life. They are dedicated not only to improving Gary's life, but to helping other cancer patients and survivors through their nonprofit Cancer Adventures.

"Cancer is like a gift in a sense, but it's something we would never re-gift," said Marlys.

A big change

For years Gary and Marlys lived in Central Oregon but didn't take much advantage of the outdoors. Gary didn't exercise much, and the couple never went hiking. Gary was unemployed for two years after being laid off from his job as a data processing manager. When Gary found a job at Nature's General Store, a natural food store in Bend, he joked he would never be tempted to buy anything there.

All of that has changed.



Photos by Pete Erickson The Bulletin

Since Gary's incurable cancer diagnosis, he and his wife, Marlys, sitting below a photo of themselves with their son, daughter-in-law, daughter and son-in-law, have focused on living a healthier, happier lifestyle. Gary brings home groceries from the natural food market where he works. While they don't see eating better and living happier to be a cure-all, Gary says, "You need to be as proactive as you can to make the rest of your life enjoyable."

Several months after the surgery, Gary decided he needed to get some exercise. He began by walking around his neighborhood. On weekends, he would go a bit farther. Eventually he thought, "Let's try a trail."

Now Gary and Marlys spend nearly every weekend outdoors, exploring trails. In winter, they strap on snowshoes to enjoy the outdoors. Gary hikes Pilot Butte nearly every day before work.

The couple's diet has also changed. Gary enjoys bringing home food from work, and they have adopted a healthy way of cooking.

After making these changes, among others, they felt different. "You need to be as proactive as you can to make the rest of your life enjoyable," said Gary.

He knows he has incurable cancer, but "it's up to me how I live the rest of my life."

This is a message he found himself, not something a doctor helped him find.

Gary isn't sure how long he has to live. About two years ago, he convinced his doctor to give him an estimate. The doctor told him about five years. Now, Gary has made a goal to beat that timetable.

Spreading the word

Marlys plays a huge role in the work they do, and Gary credits her with much of their success. They always say "we have cancer" and see it as a team family effort. They live far from their children, daughter Summer Conn, 34, lives with her husband and three children in New Jersey, and son Jeremy Johnson, 32, and his wife live in Phoenix.

Gary and Marlys figured out what works for them and put together a message to share with patients and physicians. They call it a team, which includes eight members.

Medical professionals are the first team member. The second is nutrition. Marlys stresses nutritional balance, not extremes. She added more fruit and vegetables to their diets, cut out junk food, white rice, white flour and refined sugar. Exercise is the third team member. They now hike, snowshoe, bowl, play pingpong and more.

Stress management is the next team member. One of the ways the Johnsons combat stress is through Friday night dates. They pledge not to talk about cancer, finances or work during those dates, which might be as simple as going for a walk or having a chai tea together. The fifth team member is support groups. The Johnsons



Submitted photo

Gary and Marlys Johnson enjoy the sun at Paulina Lake last summer. Hiking and being outdoors have become essential parts of the Johnsons' lives since Gary was diagnosed with incurable prostate cancer.



Pete Erickson The Bulletin

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Submitted photo

have found tremendous help from Defeat Cancer, a survivorship program with emphasis on education, nutrition, exercise and inspiration. Just being around others who are in similar situations is huge. The sixth member is a positive attitude. "A mind is a powerful tool. I want to use mine to promote healing," said Marlys.

The seventh team member is faith. The Johnsons, who attend New Hope Church, believe their faith has helped them through this period.

The final team member is finding a purpose and using skills to give back in some way.

They don't see these methods as a cure-all.

"Gary doesn't think adding more fruits and vegetables will cure his cancer," said Marlys.

But it does make him feel proactive. And that makes all the difference.

"We feel we need to build my body up as strong as possible," said Gary. "It makes me feel like I'm doing something."

One of their messages is also the importance of early detection. Gary skipped seeing the doctor for several years while he was unemployed. He believes his cancer would have been caught and could have been cured with early detection.

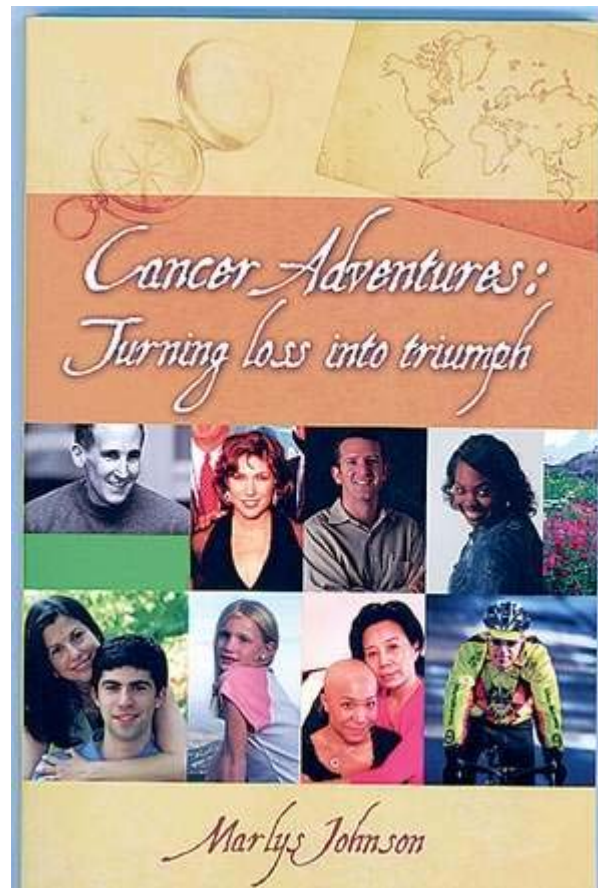
Since Gary's diagnosis, Marlys has found a new career. She was an administrative assistant at Lifewise, an insurance provider. Two years ago she became the special events and program coordinator for the cancer center at St. Charles Bend. This allows her to work with families and patients experiencing similar situations.

Cancer Adventures

Gary and Marlys formed a nonprofit in February and received a \$20,000 grant in April from the Shirley Noland Foundation based in Florida. They will use the money to travel to various locations to spread their message through education and outreach. They do not charge a speaking fee. They have upcoming plans to talk at a hospital in Boise and at Oregon Health & Science University.

They built a Web site— www.canceradventures.org — that offers tips, healthy recipes and local hikes. Marlys also wrote a book, which was self-published last year. The book, "Cancer Adventures," profiles individuals from around the country who shared "feel-good cancer stories." Her goal is to inspire other families. She plans to use any books sales to help fuel the nonprofit.

Bend residents Marlys and Gary Johnson go for a walk on the road past Todd Lake just after the first snowfall last year. Before Gary's cancer diagnosis, the couple didn't exercise much. Now they spend nearly every weekend outdoors.



Learn more about Gary and Marlys Johnson's nonprofit at www.canceradventures.org. Marly's book, "Cancer Adventures: Turning Loss Into Triumph," is available for sale through the Web site.

Reading adventures

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Gary says they are unique in many ways and therefore in demand as speakers.

“There are not a lot of people that have terminal illness that go around speaking,” said Gary.

He says the timeline can be frustrating because he doesn't have 10 or 20 years to dedicate to this.

“The whole time your window of opportunity is becoming narrower and narrower,” said Gary. “The timeline keeps getting shorter each month.”

He realizes he may not be able to do everything he wants to do in his life. But getting to share their message helps.

“Anytime I encourage someone or inspire someone, that gives me a big boost.”

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