

HE HELPS CANCER PATIENTS TO FIGHT

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NASHUA - The world slows down. The lights dim. The diagnosis is cancer. "It's the time when everything stops," says Jerry Kaplan. "And it's the one time in your life you can't afford to freeze."

It has been nearly five years since Kaplan was told he had about six months to live. And at that moment he became an advocate for cancer patients. First for himself, then for anyone else hearing what he calls "the scariest word in the English language. Kaplan is the founder and the heart of Against All Odds, a nonprofit organization whose primary goals are to help people with cancer develop a fighting attitude, do their own research and, most importantly, says Kaplan, "to teach the art of advocacy - in essence how not to freeze."

On Thanksgiving Day in 1994, Kaplan - then 54 - was knocked to the floor five times by an indescribable pain in his back, he says.

After an emergency visit to a Nashua hospital, he was referred to a hospital in Boston, where a doctor told him he had bile duct cancer.

The doctor told him point-blank that his chances for survival were slim and that the only treatment available to him would likely kill him.

Kaplan was outraged by the doctor's lack of compassion and his swiftness to take away the one thing that cancer patients thrive on - hope.

"He told me the cancer was inoperable and that I should get my affairs in order," Kaplan says. "I immediately thought, 'Who the hell are you?' And from then on when people told me, 'You're going to die,' I'd say, 'So are you.' I tell people who have been diagnosed with cancer that if they don't do anything, they'll definitely die. But if they fight, they have a chance."

Refusing to accept the doctor's grim prognosis, Kaplan began networking with family and friends. Through his cousin who was married to an oncologist, he found a liver surgeon, Jean Emond, at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco.

Ten days after the initial diagnosis in Boston, Emond performed a long, complicated surgery, removing 75 percent of Kaplan's liver (which had five tumors), his gall bladder and appendix.

When Kaplan, his wife and his two college-age daughters returned to Nashua, Kaplan was told he could not receive chemotherapy or radiation because "no one could see a tumor."

Again, Kaplan refused to take no for an answer and found a local oncologist who began a nearly one-year treatment of chemo and radiation therapy.

Kaplan is aware he was lucky to have a loving family and connections that led him to a doctor advanced in his field and willing to take a chance. But he wants the people who come to his agency for help to have those same opportunities.

"We have connections," says Kaplan, "and we make that connectiveness available to people who come to us for help."

Against All Odds also offers to help people deal with insurance companies, research available financial services, and research and review key documents such as living wills and trusts.

On his own, Kaplan also talks to medical students about dealing with cancer patients, is working on a book, "Cancer Sucks, Now Let's Get on with Our Lives," and spends a lot of time before the New Hampshire and Massachusetts houses of representatives, advocating for cancer legislation.

He thinks it's shameful that New Hampshire is not doing more to channel tobacco settlement money into cancer research and education. And he was appalled recently when a legislative committee voted down a bill that would ban all smoking in New Hampshire restaurants.

Before cancer struck, Kaplan worked in high-tech marketing and sales, and he still does some consulting work in the field. "Although I have to say my work as a cancer advocate usually takes priority," he says.

Because he "refuses to take a dime" from anyone with cancer and also refuses to be a vehicle for companies that are trying to market products to cancer patients, Kaplan is always looking for funding so he can help more people.

"Artificially, we have a cutoff point of 50 patients, because it's still run on a volunteer basis," he says. "But the truth is, I never turn anyone away." Against All Odds is free to all who use the service, but Kaplan does have some criteria for those who want his help.

"I require that the person get a second opinion, and if the insurance companies give them a hard time about that, we can help."

Kaplan says he also insists that the cancer patient calls him. "I won't make that first call if I hear someone has been diagnosed with cancer. They've got to want our services."

The third criteria is that those who come to him have to be prepared for the truth of cancer.

"I'm not going to tell someone something that is not true," he says. "People with great diagnoses die of cancer. And some people, like me, who have a horrible diagnosis will live. We tell the truth about death and cancer. But we also tell the truth about hope. I clung to those stories of people who were told they were going to die and lived to tell about it for years. I believe the term 'false hope' is an oxymoron."

Kaplan says many people have asked him how he felt about Lance Armstrong, who went on to win the Tour de France after battling cancer. "It's wonderful. It's great. But he's young and a world-class athlete." At this point Kaplan points to himself and laughs. "If you really want to give someone hope, look at this turkey. I'm still squawking."

It's no coincidence that Kaplan makes jokes about himself and even cancer.

"I knew when this started that my family was going to face this with tears and with humor," he says. "There are only two things I remember after coming out of surgery. One was asking my daughter not to smoke anymore. And the other was my friends, singing, 'You left your liver in San Francisco.' "

Kaplan says he is willing to help cancer patients with the funny stuff too. "Whatever it takes, for as long as it takes," he says.