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MAN OFFERS HOPE TO CANCER VICTIMS

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A Nashua man who beat the odds against a supposedly inoperable cancer has started a group to help people avoid feeling as helpless as he did when he was diagnosed.

Jerry Kaplan was 54 when he was told he had bile duct cancer and six months to live in 1994. But he didn't sit back and wait to die -- he did his own research, found specialists who agreed to operate on him and is alive and well today.

But most importantly, he found hope. And now he is sharing it. Kaplan founded Against All Odds, a nonprofit group that helps cancer patients develop fighting attitudes and research their conditions.

The group's services are free and help as many as 50 patients at a time. The group also helps people deal with insurance companies, research available financial services and learn about living wills and trusts.

Kaplan's battle with what he calls "the scariest word in the English language" began on Thanksgiving in 1994, when he was knocked to the floor five times by a pain in his back.

When his doctor gave him the diagnosis -- and only a few months to live -- Kaplan became outraged.

"He told me the cancer was inoperable and that I should get my affairs in order," he said. "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."

Kaplan began talking to friends and family, and eventually was put in touch with a liver surgeon in California. Ten days after his diagnosis, he was in surgery having 75 percent of his liver removed, along with his gall bladder and appendix.

Kaplan said he is aware how lucky he is to have family and friends with connections that led him to a doctor willing to take a chance. Now he wants everyone to have that opportunity.

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

Kaplan also talks to medical students about dealing with cancer patients and is working on a book to be titled, "Cancer Sucks, Now Let's Get on with Our Lives."

Before cancer, Kaplan worked in high-tech marketing and sales, and though he still does some consulting, his passion now is in helping others.

Because he refuses to accept money from anyone with cancer, as well as any company trying to market products to cancer patients, Kaplan always is looking for funding so he can help more people.

"Artificially, we have a cutoff of 50 patients, because it's still run on a volunteer basis," he said. "But the truth is, I never turn anyone away." Though the services are free, Kaplan insists on three things before he helps someone.

"I require that the person get a second opinion, and if the insurance companies give them a hard time about that, we can help," he said. Kaplan also insists that the cancer patient call him.

"I won't make that first call if I hear someone has been diagnosed with cancer," he said. "They've got to want our services." Finally, they have to be prepared for the truth.

"I'm not going to tell someone something that is not true," Kaplan said. "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."