

CONTENTS

My Extended Vacation

BY GARY GRIEGER

Did you know it's possible to live every day like you're on vacation? I know it's possible because I've done it every day since October of 1999 when I was diagnosed with stage 3 non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Since then, I have packed more enjoyment and passion into my life than I thought possible.

While I still might have other obligations to attend to, I choose to be more upbeat and appreciative when completing those tasks. Personally, I try to fit more positive things into my day, like reaching out to someone going through a difficult time, or going out of my way to ask someone how their family is doing.

I'm not saying that cancer has been easy. For me, the hardest part wasn't the chemo treatments or the stem cell transplant. It wasn't even the clinical trials, the biopsies, or the never-ending tests. The hardest part was waiting five days for results of the staging tests after my initial diagnosis. Those five days caused me to evaluate everything in my life, and what I was going to do with the time I had left.

Following my diagnosis, a family friend told me about The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. As I learned more about the services offered by the nonprofit, I found out about a program called First Connection. The program matches trained volunteers with recently diagnosed patients or caregivers to help them manage the many aspects of a cancer diagnosis.

This partnership offers hope to new members of the cancer club, and an opportunity to talk about any issues, concerns, or fears they might have. After being trained as a First Connection volunteer, I have connected with more than 80 individuals battling cancer.

The First Connection program is filled with joy and happiness, but also grief and sadness. Getting close to someone who is going through a very difficult time is not easy, but having commitments to my many First Connection contacts provides me with a purpose that drives my spirit and allows me to focus on others.

Today I feel good about the mark I have left in the world. While no one feels good about a cancer diagnosis, I know it does not have to be a death sentence. Every morning I plan my day focusing on how I can impact my life and the lives of others. Every night I review what I have accomplished. This works for me.

Learn more about The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's First Connection program at www.leukemia-lymphoma.org.

