

FEATURE STORY

On the Front Nine

BY LAMBETH HOCHWALD

Arnold Palmer's campaign to affect cancer on the front end takes him beyond the green.

For decades, Arnold Palmer's name has been synonymous with a golf career that few professional golfers could rival. After all, few can lay claim to winning 92 professional titles, 62 of which Palmer won on the U.S. PGA Tour. But there's more to Palmer than a killer swing. For this prostate cancer survivor, a future where cancer doesn't kill has become a bigger goal than limitless holes in one. Palmer, renowned for his magnetic personality as well as his sportsmanship and business acumen, sees cancer as a formidable opponent—and he has spent years [and millions of dollars] to find a cure.

Palmer says his main objective is to encourage people to have checkups to facilitate early detection of cancer. “That's the most important facet of cure,” says the 76-year-old. “You just can't stand aside and hope that you don't have it, and you can't make excuses for not having yourself checked. No one is out of the woods as far as having cancer is concerned.”

These aren't just empty words. Palmer not only survived prostate cancer, which was discovered and treated in 1997, but his beloved first wife, Winnie, was diagnosed with peritoneal carcinoma in 1998 and died of the disease one year later. His daughter Amy Saunders, now 48, was the first in the family (she has an older sister, Peggy) to be diagnosed with cancer. At age 32 with four children, Saunders found out she had breast cancer in 1990.

“In my early days I was frightened of the ‘C’ word,” Palmer recalls. “It was a lack of knowledge as much as anything, but I didn't want to even talk about it.” Now, Palmer talks about cancer all the time and says his efforts are motivated by doing what's in the best interest of those who may be helped by prevention and early detection.

For Saunders, that determination really hit home. “Both my mother and father were never indulgent people,” she says. “Their whole attitude was, ‘Let's take care of business and get things done.’ ” Early on, one physician gave her a 15 percent chance of surviving five years. “I didn't want to deal with the dismal thought that my treatment might not work,” she says. “To survive cancer, you want to be realistic, but choosing to be optimistic is crucial. That was how my father handled things when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer.”

A Family Pulls Together

When Palmer was diagnosed, he had already been a care-giver to his daughter. Still, despite the fact that he was back on the golf course two months after surgery, there was an intense amount of concern about the challenges ahead. As Saunders recalls, the diagnosis hit the family hard. “I think this was the one time I saw a little more vulnerability in my dad.” For Palmer, getting sick wasn’t an option, especially after such an esteemed golf career. “There weren’t other alternatives for him,” Saunders says. “He loved the game so much. It was his life.”

Palmer readily admits it was his late wife of 45 years (he remarried in January 2005) who helped him get through his surgery and treatment. Then, when Winnie became sick, Saunders saw her father change. Palmer began to evolve into an advocate of cancer programs supporting early detection and research. “I think he became more passionate about fighting cancer specifically because of my mom,” she says. “We both had the good fortune of having a different outcome, but when you don’t, it makes you go through different phases of anger, disappointment and fear, and that makes you want to fight it even harder and find out what you can do.”

What also compelled Palmer to begin working tirelessly on cancer causes was the breakdown in information sharing he saw when Winnie was diagnosed. “Communications were not as good as I felt they should be between the doctors and researchers,” Palmer says. “Now, I think that communication line is opening up. That’s one of the most important things for the prevention and cure of cancer.”

Doing Something About It

Beyond his role as a cancer advocate, Palmer’s concerns about access to medical care led him to play a major role in a fund-raising drive two decades ago for the Orlando Regional Medical Center, a hospital Palmer toured in 1986. “We were very overcrowded,” says John Bozard, president of Orlando Regional Healthcare Foundation. “As we were leaving he said, ‘It seems like we could do better than this for our children.’ ” Bozard later approached Palmer and asked for help to raise money. The fund-raiser led to the creation of the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children and Women. “He has been a wonderful philanthropist and has introduced us to so many people who care for children and want to make a difference in our community,” Bozard says.

Today, the Arnold Palmer Medical Center Foundation in Orlando encompasses the Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women and Babies as well as the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children. “One of the reasons Palmer’s fans have always loved him is not so much that he’s an outstanding golfer, but that he has always loved people,” Bozard says. “He doesn’t like a lot of attention. He’s one of the most humble people you’ll ever meet.”

One of the most recent grants given out by the Arnold D. Palmer Charitable Trust totaled \$2 million for the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute to establish the Arnold Palmer Endowed Chair in Cancer Prevention. The grant enabled the institute to hire Emanuela Taioli, MD, PhD, an internationally recognized expert in

cancer risk and susceptibility, to head its division of cancer prevention. “I’m very pleased about that,” Palmer says. “I have been through the laboratories there and seen some of the things they’re doing. They’re looking at ways to prevent cancer and that makes me very proud.”

Speaking Up

At the helm of the fight against prostate cancer, Palmer has become a beacon of hope. He not only talks very openly about his own experience with the disease, he also encourages men to get prostate-specific antigen (PSA) tests and go for annual exams.

Leslie D. Michelson, chief executive officer of the Prostate Cancer Foundation, says Palmer’s contributions to prostate cancer awareness, education and research are significant. “He has positively and successfully used his fame to shed light on one of the most common cancers in America.”

Whether it’s through his massive donations to cancer centers or the formation of Arnie’s Army Battles Prostate Cancer—a golf contest on select par-3 holes at clubs around the country, organized in conjunction with the Prostate Cancer Foundation—Palmer’s generosity is notable. To date, the Arnie’s Army events alone have raised \$1 million for prostate cancer research.

Palmer has remained tirelessly committed to helping people stay informed about cancer and the research that answers more questions about the disease each day. But perhaps Palmer’s biggest rallying cry is to be positive, even despite a bad prognosis. “If you approach cancer from a negative standpoint, it’s going to be more difficult to return to your normal life. That positive I-can-beat-this frame of mind will go a long way.”

In the end, Palmer hopes his legacy will go beyond the golf course. “My legacy is golf, but I wouldn’t object if I helped anyone with cancer,” he says. “I think that is a wonderful thing.”

Ask Palmer’s daughter and she’ll tell you her dad will be remembered for giving people hope. “It doesn’t matter where you’re from or what you do,” Saunders says, “cancer touches everyone’s life. I think my father has helped humanize the whole experience as well as preach to not give up. You take care of what you need to and you fight it.”