

‘If I had ever lost any faith in people, this had reaffirmed it.’

Cary Daniels, cancer survivor

‘Death sentence’ no more

STAFF PHOTO BY SUE SICKLER

Concord Road resident Cary Daniels, colon cancer survivor, recently published his first book, a science fiction/horror titled “The Dark Light Commando Inc.”

Part 2 in a two-part series on Surviving with Cancer.

By Noah R. Bombard

STAFF WRITER

Few words strike fear like the one Cary Daniels heard from his doctor last May: cancer.

“You have a certain feeling when someone hits you with the big cancer word,” Daniels said. “First you go through surprise, denial and shock. And then you start going through the process of ‘I’ve got cancer, how much time do I have?’”

Nine months and numerous chemotherapy treatments later, Daniels now uses words like “inconvenience” to describe his ordeal. Cancer, he said, is no longer the death sentence it once was.

Echoing the thoughts of Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, who underwent an operation for prostate cancer last week, Daniels says he feels “lucky.”

Daniels had colon cancer. With high blood pressure, he had been on a schedule of quarterly blood testing. When tests early last year revealed his blood was low in iron — a possible sign of internal bleeding — Daniel’s doctor ordered a colonoscopy. The procedure revealed a small tumor in his colon. In June, Daniels had the tumor removed only to find out that the cancer had spread. Chemotherapy began in July and Daniels finished his last session in January.

He had the usual side effects: nausea, exhaustion. But with the exception of about a month, Daniels continued working at his job with Exergen Corp. in Watertown. His work schedule was not always consistent — he worked half days for awhile and had to call in sick when the chemo left him too ill to work. Throughout his treatment, however, life went on.

With prodding from his wife, Janice Leahy, Daniels also managed to publish his first book — a sci-fi/horror titled “The Dark Light Commando Inc., no. 1.”

He wrote the story prior to his illness, but made the time over the past year to edit it and find a publisher. The “number one” implies further installments to follow.

“So many people look at [cancer] like its the end of life. I don’t — I have too many plans,” the 44-year-old said.

Nine months since receiving the initially shocking news that he had cancer, Daniels seems to be on the road to recovery. But like many who have gone through treatment for cancer, he’s still looking over his shoulder.

“Even though they claim you’re at a 90 percent chance of recovery, they can’t give you a definitive answer,” Daniels said.

Although treatments are improving, cancer remains the second leading cause of death in the US, just after heart disease.

According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 1.3 million new cancer cases are expected to be diagnosed in 2003, with 556,500 Americans expected to die of cancer in 2003.

Daniels is one of the lucky ones. Survival rates depend on several factors including early detection as well as the type of cancer. In the case of colon cancer, mortality rates have been steadily declining for the past 15 years, the National Cancer Society reports. The Society attributes that fact to a decrease in people with colon cancer as well as improved treatment and detection.

Its the seriousness of the disease that makes Daniels understand what Sen. Kerry meant when he said he felt lucky.

“When you go into these treatments and you see other people that are not quite as lucky as you, you get a strange feeling,” Daniels said.

For many cancer patients, keeping busy is key to a positive attitude.

“The worse time is when I didn’t have anything to do,” Daniels recalled. “If you can continue on, you continue on. I think people need the distraction.”

For Daniels, part of that distraction was the publication of his book, another major component, however, was the reaction of the community.

When he first learned of his diagnosis, Daniels said he wanted to keep it in the family. The couple told their two children, Evan and Rebecca, not to tell anyone. Word got around.

“Every other day in the initial stages of this, people I never knew would bring me food,” Daniels said. “Just the simple gesture was amazing. It just struck me that if I had ever lost any faith in people, this had reaffirmed it. People who were not associated with me or any member of my family would show up at my door. That was a really amazing fact of the whole thing.”

Through a connection with St. Michael’s Church, Daniels said support, both physical and emotional was there.

Daniels was scheduled for a CAT scan this week, an effort to continue to monitor his progress. He remains optimistic.

More information on Daniels’ book, “The Dark Light Commando,” can be found online at www.commandoinc.com. The American Cancer Society’s Web site contains numerous resources and information regarding cancer, statistics and treatment. Information can be found on the Web at www.cancer.org.