

SOWING NEW STRENGTH

BY PAIGE ALLEN

Peggy McCaughey spends hours in her garden, nurturing blooms, pulling weeds, and pruning shrubs. When she began having chronic back aches a few years ago, she figured it was from all the yard work. Cancer never crossed her mind.

After a hysterectomy in 2010, her pathology reports showed high-grade endometrial stromal sarcoma confined to the uterus wall. She was referred to an oncologist who told her not to worry; the surgery was the only treatment she needed. She just needed to come back in six months for a check-up.

Before that follow-up appointment, the back pain returned. After a routine colonoscopy – her first – she was in such crippling pain she feared her bowel had been perforated. She was rushed to the emergency room, where scans revealed a large tumor leaning on her kidney. Finally, she knew the source of her back pain.

At Fox Chase Cancer Center, McCaughey saw Alexander Kutikov, a urologic surgeon, who quickly realized the tumor was a recurrence of her endometrial sarcoma. He brought in surgical oncologist Jeffrey Farma and medical oncologist Margaret von Mehren, who started McCaughey

on an intense chemotherapy regimen.

“It was tough to keep a positive attitude during all of this,” she said. “I had two daughters at home and I knew I just had to get through it. I always called it the beast, and I was going to get this beast out of me.”

During chemotherapy, McCaughey’s weight dropped to almost 100 pounds and the medicine caused her to have hallucinations. She was scheduled to have six rounds of chemotherapy but couldn’t complete them all. Perhaps most difficult was being away from her family; she needed to be hospitalized for several days during each round of treatment.

Her husband, Hugh, took care of their two daughters at home, and McCaughey’s brother and sister helped care for her.

“When my sister found out I was sick, she stopped working and came to help me. She was my transport to and from the hospital and she would keep me company when I was in the hospital,” she said. “In the evenings after people left, I would be alone in my hospital room and my brother would just show up to keep me company. I was really lucky and blessed with my family.”

The long days in the hospital had McCaughey itching to get

back home and into her garden. She found relief in the compassion of the pastoral staff, who would sit and pray with her, and the nurses, who helped her get her fix of nature in the hospital courtyard.

After months of chemotherapy, McCaughey was disappointed to learn that her tumor hadn’t shrunk enough to be surgically removed. She asked to try radiation with Shelly Hayes, director of Fox Chase’s Buckingham campus, and though her doctors were skeptical, they agreed to try.

Radiation shrunk the tumor just enough that Farma and Kutikov believed they could operate successfully. The surgery took place on a Friday and McCaughey was expecting to hear the results on Monday. She was shocked when Kutikov stopped by her hospital room over the weekend to let her know the surgery had been a success.

“I felt so special that he cared enough to come out and tell me that and not make me wait until Monday,” she said. “It was just the greatest feeling.”

It seemed she was ready to resume her life and return to her garden, until a nagging bump on her leg that she thought was a bug bite changed color. Farma referred her to the dermatology department at Fox Chase. A



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biopsy revealed sarcoma, leading to another surgery. She still regularly sees nurse practitioner Jill Seely for check-ups on her leg and management of skin issues caused by chemotherapy.

Finally cancer-free, months of radiation and chemotherapy had taken their toll and she had a long way to go in regaining her strength. Hayes had started a group for cancer survivors at the YMCA in Doylestown, and suggested McCaughey join. There, she worked hard with a team of trainers.

“When I finished my treatment, I was very weak. I couldn’t drive or

even walk up the street by myself,” she said. “This program was so great and it was nice to connect with other cancer survivors who were going through the same process.”

Six years later, McCaughey has been back to full strength for a long time. In October 2017, she and Hugh celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary.

They traveled to Ireland so Hugh and his bagpipe band could perform in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Limerick.

“To be out with my husband was amazing,” she said. “We were

able to sightsee, visit castles and just explore. We’re both Irish and I’m hopeful that we can make it a family affair next time and bring our girls and our son-in-law.”

Both daughters have been inspired by their mom’s journey. Hannah, who was recently married, changed her major to nursing after seeing the impact nurses had on her mom. Younger daughter Grace – a survivor of childhood brain cancer – is studying art therapy with the hopes of working with young cancer patients.

McCaughey has taken up painting and helps newly diagnosed patients as part of Fox Chase’s new Patient-to-Patient Network. She’s also been able to return to gardening. She spends her time planting herbs, tending to her vegetables, and chasing away the groundhogs that like to munch on her plants. And now she is confident that any back pain is just from hard work.