

# Cancer brings a family .....

by David Plowman  
Special Sections Writer

**"C**ancer has been a gift." As unlikely as the statement may seem, it is spoken with sincerity from Bill Hart. Not only is he a two-time survivor of the disease, his positive attitude and experience helped guide his mother through the process when she was later diagnosed with cancer, and, the Hart family is convinced, may have even helped save her life.

After months of fighting what he thought was a persistent flu bug, Bill decided to see a doctor in the fall of 2000. His doctor told him he probably had lymphoma and referred him to Pacific Shores Medical Group, Comprehensive Hematology/Oncology Services to see Dr. Simon Tchekmedyian (or Dr. T as he is affectionately known) and his team.

Bill said he was never scared by the diagnosis or the treatment. In fact, Bill found parts of his treatment fascinating and actually looked forward to his weekly chemotherapy drip. "My attitude was I might as well have fun while it was going on. Coming to Pacific Shores was my big social place to see everybody and have a good time."

Bill's upbeat take on his cancer had a positive, infectious effect on the whole family. "His attitude the whole time he went through cancer and radiation was unbelievable" his sister Vicki Hart said. Bill would say "I'm not sick, I have cancer."

Though he didn't know it at the time, Bill's positive experience would later help make his mother's journey with cancer easier, paving the way for her to meet Dr. T and for her to participate in a clinical trial, which may be saving her life.

Grace Hart was diagnosed with colon cancer in October 2001, just months after Bill's cancer went into remission. Grace underwent a series of operations at a local hospital, but the doctors at that hospital later discovered that the cancer had eaten through her chest cavity. The doctors told her family that her cancer could not be treated with chemo, and that there was no known treatment for her. They told the family that Grace had just six months to live.

Rather than tell their mother the dire news, they decided to seek a second opinion from Bill's trusted Dr. T at Pacific Shores. "We at least needed to see what Dr. T had to say, because if he didn't know of anything, then there isn't anything out there," Bill said.

"Dr. T told me cancer wasn't a death sentence anymore," said Grace. Her colon cancer had spread. He told her of a new research program at Pacific Shores Medical Group, through their affiliation with UCLA. The drug being tested, called Avastin, basically prevents the growth of

new cancer cells by blocking the formation of new blood vessels around the cancer.

"The cancer cells do tend to stimulate the production of new blood vessels, it is almost like they are building the roads to get out there and obtain what they need and travel out," said Dr. T. But Avastin halts that spread of new blood vessels. "It is, in a way, like an embargo on these

cells, which is surrounding them and not allowing anything to feed them," Dr. T explains. Dr. T says research shows that the drug can prevent the cancer cells from growing beyond one or two millimeters. When used in conjunction with chemotherapy, the growth of new cancer cells is prevented, even as existing cells are killed.

Dr. T explained to Grace that Pacific Shores Medical Group was currently testing the drug in a double-blind clinical trial (meaning that neither the patient or the doctor knows if the patient is receiving the drug or a placebo), but that results of the drug had been very promising before the double-blind trials began.

## closer together



The Hart family, from left to right: Granddaughter Sasha, daughter Vicki, mother Grace and son William.

Dr. T assured her that the new drug was given in addition to the best current treatment.

After thinking about her options, Grace ultimately decided to participate in the study, cautioning Dr. T that if she got sick, she would drop out of the study.

But Grace did not get sick. She did not even lose her hair. In fact, by September of 2002, she was in remission. "Preliminary results presented at national meetings this year show that we finally have an effective and really new way of treating cancer," said Dr. T. Though neither Dr. T or Grace will know if she is on the drug or the placebo until the study concludes in January 2004, Grace says she thinks she is getting the drug.

Grace's granddaughter Sasha says her grandmother is back to her old self and seeing her enjoy gardening, cooking and crocheting again makes her smile.

The Hart family is convinced that Bill's experience with cancer was not a curse, but instead happened so they would know where to turn when his mother got ill. "If it wasn't for Bill having cancer, we would have never heard about Dr. T. We are convinced that things happen for a reason," Vicki said.

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