

Touched by a tumor

Ralph Hellermann did what he could to overcome cancer; now family, friends continue his fight to find a cure

by Carol Moorman
carol@saukherald.com

Melrose—A photo of Ralph Hellermann on his motorcycle sits on a shelf in his sister, Marian Goebel's, Melrose home.

It's a favorite photo to those who knew Ralph.

It's also one of the few photos taken of this mild-mannered, quiet man who had a passion for family, friends, cycles and anything mechanical.

He also had hope—hope that doctors could find a cure for his brain tumor. Until the day he died, May 17, 2007, he did what he could to overcome this cancer and hopefully find a cure.

His friends and family are continuing his fight. They have formed "Working Together for a Cure," and will hold a "Kickoff to Summer Car Show and BBQ Cook-off," starting at 9 a.m., on Saturday, May 31, in the Sauk River Park in Melrose. All money raised will go towards brain cancer research.

"We just want to make sure nobody else goes through what Ralph went through," said his friend Dorothy "Dottie" Smith, of Melrose, late last Wednesday afternoon sitting around the table at the home of Ralph's sister Marian Goebel, with his other sister Elaine Thom of Sauk Centre.

Ralph, the person

Ralph was raised on the family farm of his parents, Alma and Paul, northwest of Melrose, now homesteaded by his only brother, John. It was here that Ralph's mechanically-inclined nature was nurtured. He graduated from Melrose High School in 1972 and a few years later purchased the NAPA store in Melrose, and the Sauk Centre store in 2003.

"That was an important part of his life," said Marian, adding, "He was known as 'NAPA Ralph.'"

This man who liked to have fun was articulate and particular about things he owned.

"Our cars were never clean enough for him," said a smiling Marian about their soft-spoken brother who would do anything to help anyone out.

He liked to putz around and enjoyed the challenge of taking something apart and putting it back together. If a customer came into his store with a problem, Ralph could usually figure out what to do.

"He would even put new windshield wipers on for women," said Elaine.

"He instilled that service ethic in his employees," said Dottie.

She knows firsthand. In 2004 Dottie had purchased a motorcycle and needed a headlight fixed. She went to NAPA.

"Carol (Kramer) said 'That guy knows about motorcycles,'" said Dottie.

That guy was Ralph. He fixed her headlight and other items on her motorcycle so she could take her motorcycle test. They became friends and started dating.

Dottie smiles when mentioning the street-rod that Ralph built using two cars, with hopes of displaying it at car shows and swap meets.

"It was a '40 Chevy Coupe with a Trans-Am engine and chassis," said Dottie.

But he was not able to finish the street-rod. It sits in a shed on the farm, but family members hope to display it at the May 31 event.

After all, it was Ralph's pride and joy.

Ralph, the fighter

After Christmas of 2004 Ralph, who had just turned 50 that August, showed signs that something might be wrong medically, at first thinking it was the flu or a cold that wouldn't go away.

"He was very tired and had trouble expressing himself," said Dottie.

A CT scan done at the Melrose Hospital showed a spot on his brain, and he was referred to the St. Cloud Hospital. In April of 2005 he was diagnosed with a Glioblastoma Multiforme Stage 4 brain tumor or Astrocytomas. Doctors told him the cause was unknown, as is the case with most brain tumors.

Marian and Elaine, mentioning the environment, more specifically herbicides and pesticides, find it ironic that two other people, who lived in the rural area close to the Hellermann farm, died from brain tumors. Ralph's brother John has been a dedicated organic farmer for five years.

There are more than 120 different types of brain tumors. Ralph's tumor was rare for someone his age. Also, he didn't experience the normal signs like seizures and headaches.

"He was blessed, that way," said Elaine.

Each year over 190,000 brain tumors are diagnosed in the United States, of which 43,000 are primary brain tumors, according to information from the American Brain Tumor Association.

Ralph's was a primary tumor, meaning it began in the brain and stayed in the brain. Metastatic tumors begin as a cancer elsewhere in the body and spread, or metastasize to the brain.

"That was the only good thing about his tumor because it wouldn't spread anywhere else," said Elaine, a former nurse.

That May, doctors removed two-thirds of Ralph's brain tumor, unable to remove it all because of the blood supply and connection to the rest of his brain.

Although doctors gave him a prognosis of one year to live, he was determined to beat the cancer. Treatment started with radiation, which temporarily stopped the growth. His first chemotherapy treatment was done at the Coborn's Cancer Center in St. Cloud.



HERALD PHOTO BY CAROL MOORMAN
Ralph Hellermann's brother and sisters, (from right) John Hellermann, Marian Goebel and Elaine Thom, and his friend, Dottie Smith, are pictured above with their favorite photo of him on his motorcycle.

Dottie, who has worked part-time at Coborn's for 11 years, explains the Coborn family started this cancer center after a family member had cancer. Currently, a portion of money from certain food items sold during May will be donated to the cancer center.

When that chemo treatment didn't reduce the tumor, Ralph entered three experimental trials at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

"A major problem treating brain tumors is what they call a 'blood-brain barrier,'" said Elaine. "It's like the brain has its own security system, so a lot of the chemo didn't work on Ralph."

They had high hopes when the tumor shrank during the first trial, but after nine months it was like the tumor became immune to the treatment and started growing again. The same thing happened during the second and third trial treatments.

Although he was running out of options, this straight-haired man who now had curls on his head from the treatment, never gave up hope.

"We still had hope two weeks before he died," said Marian.

Ralph got to the point, medically, that he chose to sell his business, as tough as it was.

"That was his baby," said Dottie.

Marian said Ralph wanted the business to stay in the family.

"He always tried to give his nieces and nephews a bad time and pick on them," said Elaine.

"When he did that we knew that he felt good," said Marian, with Elaine adding, "Those times were precious."

In January of 2006, Marian's son, and Ralph's nephew Adam purchased the stores. When he was up to it, Ralph still helped out.

Family and his friends, many who shared in his motorcycle passion, were constant visitors in his Melrose home, also taking Ralph to his cancer treatments. That included an aunt and uncle taking turns driving Ralph to his radiation treatment five days a week for five weeks.

"Ralph Revermann set up the schedule," said Elaine.

Four of his friends, Ralph Revermann, Pete Rothfork, Jim Meyer and Jay Petermeier and their wives, got together once a month for "Men's Cook Night."

"It was a way they could spend time with Ralph," said Dottie.

"And he looked forward to it," said Marian.

Dottie said Ralph picked out his mother's pot roast to make when it was their turn to host the event. She smiles when talking about how he also had a passion for vanilla ice cream, so much so that they usually stopped to get ice cream on their way home from the Mayo Clinic.

"Sometimes ice cream was the only thing he could eat," said Elaine.

In March of 2007 Ralph stopped taking all treatment, after his options ran out and nothing more could be done to stop the tumor growth.

Ralph, the perseverer

But Ralph persevered as best he could.

"He also had great faith," said Dottie.

So does the Hellermann family.

"We were brought up with that. Our faith has been a big part of our life," said Marian.

To help support him in his fight and his faith, Dottie became Catholic, choosing Ralph as her sponsor. But his cancer had advanced, to the point that he needed help walking and could not talk.

Ralph was unable to attend the Easter Vigil ceremony welcoming Dottie into the Catholic faith. Ralph Revermann filled in for him.

Sitting around the table last Wednesday, Marian quietly said "one year ago today Ralph went into the hospital."

Family and friends stayed with him in the hospital, much of which he spent sleeping. Although he knew they were there, he was unable to communicate.

"I'd tell him I loved him and ask him to blink once if he loved me too, and he'd do that," said Dottie.

"He knew what he wanted to say but couldn't say it," said Marian.

On May 17, 2007, his siblings, nieces and nephews and Dottie were with him when he passed away.

Although difficult, they were comforted knowing he did everything he could to fight the cancer.

Reciting Psalm 23, Dottie said God has a plan for everyone. A plan that now has Ralph's family and friends continuing his fight to ensure no one else is touched by brain tumors.

Ralph may be gone but his memory lives on in the life he lived and shared with others.

That is evident when family and friends get on their motorcycles and head down the road.

"I can still feel him around me," said Elaine, "like he's still with us."

Reprinted from a May 2008 *Sauk Centre Herald*.