

# Focusing on family

## Tumor in the back of Rieland's mind

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**New Munich**—Joe Rieland's brain tumor is always in the back of his mind, literally.

Two years ago he was diagnosed with a stage II Oligodendroglioma tumor in the left side of his brain.

But this husband to Brenda and father to April, Courtney and Hunter counts himself lucky.

Today, that tumor hasn't grown and he is considered in remission.

There's no more taking life for granted.

"We take life one day at a time," Joe said Wednesday morning sitting around the table with Brenda, his wife of almost 21 years.

### The family

Joe is a New Munich native and the son of Monica and the late Vernon Rieland. His siblings include Steve and Denise Rieland of Sauk Centre, Jim and Sue Rieland of New Munich, Mary and Mark Mayers of Melrose, Dennis and Tami Rieland of Sauk Centre, Margie and Steve Hinnenkamp and Bill and Peggy Rieland, all of Melrose.

He is a 1980 graduate of Melrose High School and has worked in the turkey industry 27 years.

In 1986, Joe married Brenda Heidgerken, daughter of Paul and Mary Ann, and started raising their family, living on a turkey farm south of New Munich.

Cancer hit them for the first time nine years ago when Joe's dad was diagnosed and passed away five months later.

### The diagnosis

June 22, 2006, is a day neither Joe nor Brenda will forget.

It was late morning on a Thursday and Joe, then 44 years old, was working at a turkey farm about five miles from their home. He was in a barn when he got a phone call from his employer, Pete Rothfork. On a cell phone, Joe went outside for better reception, leaning against his truck. Done with the call, he noticed numbness in his right arm, then his right leg.

"I fell to the ground," said Joe, admittedly shook up.

His arm wasn't strong enough to push himself up. Glancing up, he noticed the leaves on the trees were getting blurry, then he passed out. Before this he was healthy and had no signs or symptoms that anything was physically wrong. In fact, he faithfully has a physical every other year. Later, they would find out this was his first seizure.

"I got scared and thought my life was over," said an emotional Joe, tears welling up in the eyes of this man who has a passion for hunting, fishing, trapping and cards and years back playing softball.

Joe came to when his cell phone rang, they figure about half an hour after



**HERALD PHOTO BY CAROL MOORMAN**  
Brenda and Joe Rieland have a lot to smile about. Two years ago Joe was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Today, that tumor is in remission and life has returned to normal-somewhat. They stand in their rural New Munich home in front of a family photo.

he passed out. It was Audrey Sprenger from the office, although to this day Joe doesn't remember talking to her. Joe then called Brenda, telling her he needed to go to the doctor. April picked him up, drove him home, and Brenda immediately drove him to the Albany Hospital.

"I figured it was pretty bad if he wanted to go see the doctor," said Brenda.

Joe felt tired and "wiped out."

"Like I had worked 10 hours and it was only before dinner time," he said.

He was first tested for possible heart problems, but CT scans on his brain revealed a spot. An MRI the following day confirmed a tumor.

"When they called and asked us to come in for the results I knew it wasn't good," said Brenda, who works part-time at the Albany Hospital and Medical Center.

They set up the first available appointment at the Mayo Clinic on July 12. Not wanting to wait that long, they were able to schedule a June 26 appointment with a neurologist at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in the Twin Cities. A June 30 biopsy confirmed a cancerous tumor about the size of an egg. It was a primary tumor, meaning it started in the brain and could spread within the brain or spinal chord but not elsewhere in his body.

"It was not solid but infiltrating into the brain," said Brenda.

Both said the care he received at Abbott from his team of medical professionals was wonderful.

Removing the tumor completely wasn't an option because of the location on the upper left side of the brain, controlling speech, vision and strength nerves.

"That's the side that controls the right side of the body and that's the side that went numb," said Joe.

He had three minor seizures while in the hospital after the biopsy.

A second opinion on July 12 at the Mayo Clinic confirmed Abbott's diagnosis and treatment.

### The treatment

Doctors could give them no reason for the tumor but they did say it could have been there from one to five years.

"They could tell it was there for a while because it was wearing on his skull," said Brenda.

The important part to them was that it was treatable.

Chemotherapy was Joe's best option because it would hit the brain areas infiltrated with the tumor, versus radiation, which would attack one spot.

Another date they won't forget is July 19, when Joe started chemotherapy; the first of 12 treatments every 28 days.

"That was on our 20th wedding anniversary," said Brenda.

The chemo was in the form of five Temodar pills taken at night at home five days in a row.

"The first days weren't so bad, but the last two days I was tired and worn out. I'd even have to come in and take a nap at noon," said Joe.

The goal was to ensure the tumor would not grow.

"Doctors told us if the tumor shrinks, it's icing on the cake," said Brenda.

This active man had plenty of restrictions, like not driving for the first six months because of the seizure possibilities.

Brenda smiles when mentioning he was not supposed to work, but "did anyway," although he knew when to quit. He couldn't go swimming or fishing alone, without making sure someone was there to watch him, just in case.

He was, and still is, limited to not lifting over 75 pounds, due to the possible pressure on his brain. He is also not supposed to climb high heights, which in his occupation is a challenge.

"Pete will call and ask me if I'm still grounded," said Joe, his humor evident.

### The support

Joe and Brenda said the support and prayers from family and friends was overwhelming, including donations of gas cards and cash.

Life is returning to normal for this family of five, compared to that first year following the diagnosis when they didn't do much or go anywhere, other than to doctor appointments.

The end of May it will be one year since Joe's last chemotherapy treatment. On medication, he hasn't had a seizure since October of 2006.

"They call them focal seizures because I am conscious the whole time," said Joe.

In fact, he could tell if a seizure was coming on. Like the time he was driving a combine, felt a seizure starting and stopped driving until the seizure passed.

Blood work done weekly at first is down to once a month at the Albany Hospital. He will continue having MRIs at Abbott every three months for two years, decreasing if the prognosis is good.

Even his surgical scar on the left side of his head is less evident, covered now by dark hair with a touch of grey. Meanwhile, he keeps busy.

"That way I don't think about it," said Joe.

Instead, he focuses on his family and work, and thinks ahead to a planned vacation next year.

These days, that's what's on the back of his mind.

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