

# A journey of faith, hope, love

## Together, Thostensons tackle cancer diagnosis

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**Melrose**—They call it their “Christmas Celebration Tree.”

Faith, Hope, Love are etched on three ornaments hanging on Larry and Karen Thostenson’s 15-foot real Christmas tree that stands tall in their Melrose home.

Each ornament has special meaning as they continue their “journey,” as Karen calls it, through 2006; a year that saw their family face challenges during Larry’s multiple myeloma diagnosis.

“You do look at life a little differently,” said Larry, the afternoon of Wednesday, Dec. 13, sitting around the living room table with Karen, his wife of almost 35 “wonderful” years.

Karen admits going through what they have “renews your faith in God, in humanity.”

“And it encourages families to put gathering before gifts,” she said.

There’s only one gift under their tree, as the smell of pine fills the room along with the soothing music of “Silent Night” from a special CD Larry made for family and friends. On the CD jacket is a family photo that includes their children—daughter Shanna and husband Wes Schiffler and their children Gabi, Nate, Isaac and Eli; son Dustin and wife Cathy and their children, Chloe and Devan and daughter Tessa and fiancé Eric Beuning.

### Faith

The Thostensons put their faith in God and in their doctors from the minute Larry was diagnosed on Jan. 19, 2006, with multiple myeloma. It was double vision on Jan. 2, that first sent Larry to the doctor on Jan. 3, which happened to be Karen’s birthday. Family physician Dr. Jim Mohs ordered an MRI, which indicated the presence of a brain tumor. Two weeks later he received the multiple myeloma diagnosis.

“Shocked” is how Larry describes his reaction. Karen said how ironic it was that Larry was diagnosed on her Dad’s birthday, Jan. 19, and her dad died from late stage multiple myeloma almost two years earlier.

Multiple myeloma, also known as myeloma or plasma cell myeloma, a cancer of the plasma cell, is an incurable but treatable disease. It is a cancer of the plasma cell, a part of the immune system that produces immunoglobulins (antibodies) to help fight infection and disease, according to information from the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation. Hypercalcemia, anemia, renal damage, increased susceptibility to bacterial infection, and impaired production of normal immunoglobulin are common manifestations of multiple myeloma. It is often also characterized by osteoporosis, usually in the pelvis, spine, ribs and skull.

Looking back, the Thostensons think that the pneumonia Larry had following hernia surgery may have been an early symptom of the disease. They are just thankful the cancer manifested itself when and how it did.

### Hope

Larry pulls out of a wallet business cards with names of his physicians at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview. Their hope that these doctors could help has come true.

Neurologist Steven Haines and ear, nose and throat specialist David Hamlar performed his brain biopsy and determined the tumor was cancerous. His skull-based tumor was immediately attacked with 10 days of radiation therapy as well as chemotherapy.

His radiologist is Dr. James Omer. His “main man,” as they call him, is Dr. Gregory Vercellotti, a professor of medicine at the U of M. They determined that Larry’s cells were “multiplying out of control” explains Karen, “wearing away the base of the skull.”

“I’m only the second case that they’ve (doctors Haines and Vercellotti) seen like this in their combined 52 years,” said Larry.

Karen admits looking back it’s all “a little surreal.”

“It was easy once we were diagnosed,” said Larry, adding, “It was hell on Karen and the kids.”

With so much information presented to them, the Thostensons purchased a digital recorder where they recorded all their meetings with doctors.

“They give you a lot of information but the doctors always made time to answer our questions,” said Karen, adding that Dr. Vercellotti had a “knack for explaining things in every day terms.”

Larry and Dr. Vercellotti related well with one another. Of course, it helped that the doctor was just one year older than the patient.

“We’re buddies,” said Larry.

Dr. Vercellotti told them Larry’s best chance at long-term survival was a double (tandem) bone marrow transplantation, as part of a clinical trial through the university’s Blood and Marrow Transplant Program.

“Doing it twice results in much longer remission. Since there is no cure, this is the best way it can be held at bay or in complete remission,” said Karen.

“Especially if you are strong, like bull,” adds Larry, the eternal optimist.

His only sibling, Nancy Weimerskirch who lives in Belgrade with her husband Dennis, was not a match, so Larry’s own stem cells—as many as 300,000,000 for each transplant—were harvested and transplanted back into his body.

Larry had his first transplant on June 1 and the second on Sept. 1. In between, doctors determined he also had a slight heart attack.

Looking across the table at Karen, he recalls what it was like “getting hit over the head” with all this—a hernia, pneumonia, double vision, a brain tumor, multiple myeloma and a heart attack.

“... for a minute there, I thought we were in trouble,” said Larry, quoting one of his favorite lines from the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

During this time, Karen and Nancy were his major caregivers. Karen smiles when thinking of all the smoothies she made for Larry, from gallons and gallons of ice cream.

They used the approach that dealing with the disease was a family affair, and all were welcome to be caregivers and have a say in the treatment options.

“Shanna was my tour guide, even though she got me lost walking,” said Larry of their oldest daughter. “Dustin was my chauffeur and my jail springer when it came time for me to get weekend passes out. And Tessa was my nutritionist and physical therapist.”

There were some “down in the dump” days that became “pick me up” days thanks to a special great-nephew, who is less than one year old.

Kadin “Little Man” Hoven, son of Shawn and Heidi of Bemidji, was at the same hospital waiting for a kidney transplant, which he will receive from his father.

“Just knowing Kadin was receiving great reports would lift my spirits and give me the encouragement I needed,” said Larry, adding, “Now I’m recuperating and he’s following right behind.”

For about six months they stayed at an apartment five minutes from the Blood and Marrow Transplant Clinic, so Larry could be monitored daily.

He was able to go home on weekend passes. In fact, he surprised family and friends, showing up at



HERALD PHOTOS BY CAROL MOORMAN

The Thostensons stand in front of their 15-foot Christmas Celebration Tree; Larry holding an ornament with the word hope on it and Karen holding an ornament with faith etched on it. These ornaments hold special meaning this Christmas. It was about one year ago that Larry was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and although he still remains in a clinical trial, doctors have told him that there is no sign of the myeloma in his body.

the June 16 Relay for Life in Sauk Centre.

On Sept. 23 Larry returned home for good, with plenty of instructions, a medication regimen and checkups on his schedule.

Wherever he went, he wore a mask over his face to ensure he didn’t catch as much as a cold.

“Faithfully, I wore that mask, walking, to church, ...” said Larry, who on Dec. 12 was told he no longer needs to wear the mask.

He walks daily, often with Karen. That from a man who just after the transplant could barely walk up one flight of stairs.

Regular checkups will continue. And he kids Karen about when she would drive them to his appointments in the Twin Cities.

“When I wore that eye patch, I had the good eye closed too,” he said, smiling.

Both appreciate the care and attention they received, and continue to receive, at the university and in their hometown from Dr. Mohs and now Dr. Kurt Schwieters, “a gifted doctor and valued friend,” said Larry.

“Minnesota has the best medical facilities, bar none,” said Karen.

They realize how lucky they have been during this whole ordeal.

All they have to do is remember some of the people they have met, or just seen, at the BMT Clinic.

“We were spared so much pain,” said Larry, as Karen adds, “Out of respect for people who have suffered more, it’s humbling to receive the benefits of a good outcome.”

They think back to the beginning of their journey when “every darn thing that could go bad, went bad.”

But they never gave up hope.

“How could we give up hope, when all those people at the BMT Clinic never gave up hope,” said Karen.

“We always said ‘just wait until the end.’ When we really need the good luck it will come—and it did,” he said.

Larry feels “fortunate” to be chosen for a new clinical trial during the maintenance portion of his treatment, that will hopefully help another multiple myeloma patient down the road. It is the third clinical trial he has been involved in during his diagnosis.

“These clinical trials are for gathering data to find the next best way to stop the progression or to cure it,” said Karen.

### Love

It was the love and support from family and friends that has gotten the Thostensons through their journey this past year.

“It’s exposed us to some pretty good people,” Karen said.

Employees and officials at the city of Melrose, where Karen works, have allowed her to work around Larry’s hectic schedule. And Larry, who will be off work about 16 months, doesn’t have to worry about retaining his position at Kraemer Lumber Company.

“It’s nice to know there’s a job there waiting for me,” said Larry.

Financial worries are less because they have good insurance. Karen said cancer insurance they took out “hoping never to use it” has been a godsend, helping to pay for things like lodging and mileage to and from doctor appointments.

And then there are friends and neighbors, like those who tended to their yard work in their absence and brought food and music to the house.

“Last week four friends brought over fish,” said Larry.

Freshly caught fish, no less.

They have piles and piles of cards and letters from “people who came out of the woodwork,” some they haven’t heard from since their high school days, while Larry was growing up in Belgrade and Karen on a farm in rural Elrosa.

Larry smiles when the word flowers are mentioned. This man, who loves cut flowers, was unable to have any during the entire transplant process and recovery—but now he can enjoy them to his heart’s content.

He admits Tuesday, Dec. 12, was one of the happiest days of his life. Not only did he receive a good report from his doctors, but this 55-year-old man who has always had a passion for music, got to play Santa. He distributed CDs he compiled filled with Christmas music to people at the university clinic who have played an important part in his and Karen’s life this past year. Larry did the same while he was a patient there, handing out hundreds of CDs with bible tunes to the children who were patients.

It is his way of spreading joy and love during this holiday season. A season that continues to be filled with hope, as the ornament daughter Tessa gave him to hang on their Christmas tree says.

To them that’s what this Christmas season is all

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