

# Don't You Get It?

During a terrifying six-week period in late 1995 and early 1996, we were diagnosed with cancer. Both of us. Husband and wife. Roger's was a rare and – in the words of one oncologist – “particularly nasty” type of kidney cancer. Kathy's was breast cancer with positive lymph nodes.

Roger's treatment consisted of the removal of his right kidney. After a nine-day hospital stay, he came home to begin a long recovery period. There was no other treatment. Either the surgery had removed all of the cancer from his body, or it had not. Only time would tell.

Kathy's treatment began with a lumpectomy and lymph node dissection. These surgeries were followed by six months of chemotherapy, twenty-five radiation treatments, and the beginning of a five-year course of Tamoxifen.

By far our biggest enemy was depression. We quickly tired of well-intentioned visitors' admonitions to “keep a positive attitude.” How glib those words sounded as Kathy lost her hair and fought the other side effects of treatment while also worrying about Roger. How elusive were any positive thoughts for him as he struggled to

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recover from surgery while caring for a sick wife. And how our hearts ached as our sons smiled through their tears and said over and over again, “You're going to be fine. I just know you're going to be fine.” In spite of their own pain and terror, they tried valiantly to comfort and reassure both themselves and us.

Then a miracle happened. That's the only way we can explain it. For Roger, it was a gradual thing. His natural good humor and dry wit returned. He began to make jokes about the sur-

geries, the treatments, the side effects, and the doctors. When curious, caring people asked how we were doing, he launched into a hilarious monologue that left them laughing and wondering how on earth he did it. It certainly wasn't that our situation had become funny. It was just that laughing made it easier to live with.

For Kathy, the miracle happened in an instant and in – of all places – the post office. After months of not being able to run the simplest of errands on her own, she had driven alone to the post office and was standing in line to buy stamps. A little shaky, but standing nonetheless. Two women in the line ahead of her complained loudly about the fact that only one customer service window was open and that the line was so long and seemed not to be moving at all. Their complaints made her angry. She wanted to shout at them, “Are you crazy? Do you know how lucky you are to be standing here? I would gladly stand in this line all day long just for the glorious privilege of being here!”

Elated and excited, she came home and announced to Roger, “I finally get it! I understand what this is all about!” He said that he “got it,” too.

What we finally “got” was something we had heard before but never really understood: that every breath we take and every minute we are alive are precious gifts meant to be savored and

appreciated. Life is a school-room and cancer is a hard lesson, but perhaps a necessary one for some of us. Maybe we couldn't have “gotten it” any other way.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Say “Thank you.” These are the words we live by now. Since that day we haven't looked back. We now know that cancer was both the worst and the best thing that ever happened to us. We have been more joyful and more alive in the four years since our cancer diagnoses than we were in the 45 years before. We have made a pact to focus only on life-affirming projects and goals and to do something toward those ends every day of our lives. It doesn't matter how

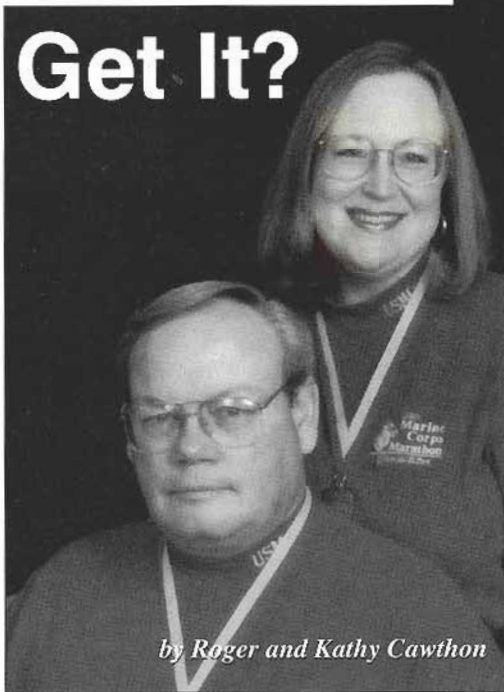
long our lives are; what matters is what we do with them.

We are both active volunteers with the American Cancer Society and its signature event, Relay for Life. We do a lot of public speaking, individually and as a couple. Roger's impromptu monologue has now become a much-in-demand presentation at dinners and special events. He has lived his dream of flying an airplane and has gone parasailing.

Kathy (a journalist and two-time nonfiction author) is working on her first novel. Last year, she trained for six months to run a marathon. On October 24, 1999, she completed the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C. At the finish line, she tore up and tossed into the air the chemotherapy schedule she had saved for four years and carried the 26.2 miles of the race.

Oh, by the way, Roger decided at the last minute to jump in and run the marathon with her. They finished side-by-side and received their finisher's medals together. It simply couldn't have ended any other way.

**Editor's Note:** *Former CNN sportscaster Roger Cawthon and his wife, author and photographer Kathy Cawthon, have turned their almost unbelievable story of cancer survival into a series of programs. To contact them regarding speaking engagements, call (757) 826-5740. ■*



*by Roger and Kathy Cawthon*