

# the Power of GOOD NEIGHBORS

by Cecelia Wilson

**GEORGE BROWN** spent 18 months caring for his father through a prolonged illness that resulted in his father's passing. But George had no idea that the long days of confronting a life-threatening illness were far from over. Just three days after the death of his father, George became sick. It was November 2007, and the flu-like symptoms that seemed innocuous enough initially would prove to be the opening salvo in an intense battle for George's life. The following year would test his faith, but also prove that the relationships we form in our lives can provide invaluable strength.

As a precaution, George went to see close friend Dr. David Staggs who told the Searcy farmer/rancher he had pneumonia. Though George went home to recuperate, Dr. Staggs insisted George return in one month to have a follow-up x-ray. In a week, Brown felt better and returned to work on his ranch tending his cattle. He did, however, heed the doctor's advice and went back for the x-ray after several weeks.

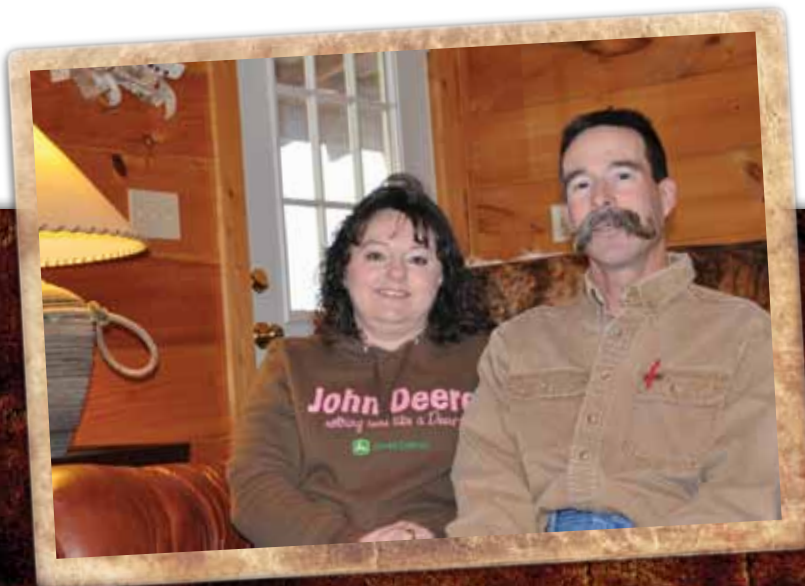
That night, Dr. Staggs' nurse called asking George to come back into their office the next day. The x-ray had revealed George's chest cavity was filled with fluid, which they promptly removed, and though there didn't appear to be signs of cancer, there was a nagging suspicion that things just weren't quite right. As the next step, he was referred to Oncologist Dr. Ryan Koch for more extensive testing.

It was on a Monday, the first of March 2008, and life was about to change forever for George and his wife of 22 years, Lisa. The appointment with Dr. Koch resulted in a brutal reality: "You have cancer, it is rare and you have to get to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston." They told the Browns it could take a couple of weeks to get placed, so George and Lisa went home intending to get their affairs in order before leaving for Texas. But, on Tuesday at 10:00 a.m., they received a call from Houston. If the Browns could be at M.D. Anderson by 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday, George could see a doctor.

With very little notice and no time to make plans for their ranch, cattle and business affairs, four hours after receiving their phone call concerning the next day's early morning appointment, the Browns were on the road to Texas. It was almost incomprehensible. "I didn't feel bad," George says of his lack of symptoms. But, knowing he must act and act quickly, the couple "just left; dropped everything and walked away" in order to place their faith in the doctors in Houston and the potential solution the doctors would suggest.

Hearing the diagnosis of cancer is never easy, but when that cancer is rare, the fear that results can almost be debilitating. According to the National Cancer Institute, Waldenström macroglobulinemia is a "rare type of slow-growing, non-Hodgkin lymphoma (cancer that begins in the cells of the immune system)" with only 1,500 new cases occurring annually in the United States. While there is no known cure, there are several treatments that have been effective in some patients to prevent or control the symptoms.

With so many unknowns, George did recognize that he would need every ounce of rigid structure and fortitude built into him by his late father, an "iron-fisted Navy veteran." "I was devastated at first, but I told myself, 'If I've ever had faith, now it's time to prove it.'"



It would be that faith in God and an unflagging grit that would keep him going. "I thought if I could win this in my head, I could win it in my body," he said with determination. He would continuously need all that and more in the coming months. It would be anything but easy. For the next seven months, George and Lisa lived between the hospital and a hotel in Houston. He was given extensive 5-day-long treatments during a 3 – 5 week span of time. He lost his hair, his prized moustache and plenty of weight. Strength seeped out of his weakened body and ports and tubes dotted his lanky frame. But time for lamenting what-ifs in the past was over; he had to focus on small blocks of the present and simply get through a minute at a time, a day at a time, a week at a time. Leaning on God and not looking back, his mantra became simply, "Look up, look forward."

Between treatments, the couple received 2 - 3 week breaks when they were allowed to return to Searcy, allowing George to regain enough strength to undergo the next round of treatments. But, despite the fact the couple had left Searcy in such a hurry and were absent for long periods, they barely noticed it by looking at their ranch each time they returned home. "It was as if life [back home without us] never missed a beat." Unable to take care of their land, their cattle or their business for themselves, friends, neighbors and business associates had quietly taken over those daily duties for the Browns. "We left in the middle of calving season. I had cattle to tend; work to be done," Brown says of what was left behind. That's when their family and friends came forward, most without asking what needed to be done, and simply pitched in to take care of chores for the Browns. Some saw to the cattle and their needs as if those cattle were their own. George had been in the process of looking to buy a bull. A neighbor found one for him, purchased it and, using Brown's truck and trailer, put the bull in the appropriate pasture at the appropriate time. Another neighbor took in the Brown's "child" – their 13-year-old beagle – and fed, watered and cared for her like they would their own pet.



*Thank you to all of the people who helped during this difficult time.*



*Those we know about and those we don't... we will always remember you!*



**“THAT’S WHEN THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS CAME FORWARD, MOST WITHOUT ASKING WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE, AND SIMPLY PITCHED IN TO TAKE CARE OF CHORES FOR THE BROWNS.”**



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The amount of help offered and the amount given was breathtaking. On one visit home, Brown noticed how green his pastures looked, almost as if they had been fertilized. They had been. The fertilizer had been purchased and spread and when he asked to pay he was told very matter-of-factly that it was “taken care of.” The yard was mowed all summer; the hay was baled. Caldwell Feed Store knew what feed he preferred and helped those who came for the supplies get what George always used. One close friend called the Browns a week after they had arrived in Houston: “Do you need me there? I’ll start that way right now if you need me.” Another friend was a pilot: “I can fly you back and forth between Searcy and Houston if you need me to.” They didn’t, but they knew the option was open if it had become necessary.

As Administrative Assistant to White County Judge Michael Lincoln, Lisa was also on the receiving end of assistance during the intensive seven month period. Telling her “family comes first,” the Judge and his staff packaged paperwork to send to Lisa, who would complete tasks via the internet while her husband got through his treatments. Her mother would also spend time with the couple during stays in Houston in order to help get food, necessities and help in any way she could. And, of course, there were the prayers, cards and letters that were sent from local churches, Valley Baptist and Crosby Baptist specifically, as well as from churches throughout Arkansas and the nation once word had gotten out of the Brown’s ordeal.

Armed with such a barrage of caring, George’s spirits were bolstered and during the lowest, bleakest periods of his hospital stays he was reminded of the fight he had to fight and the numbers of individuals working for him at home so he could work to get through his daily regimen in Houston. By September 2008, he had completed his final treatments and was allowed to return home for good. His doctors still monitor him every 60 days, but today George and Lisa Brown have regained a much closer-to-normal routine. While it took him numerous months to rebuild his stamina, George has returned to the rural life and work he loves, but he does so with a totally different perspective on each precious moment.

Declaring he has a blessed life, George now holds each day as more special than before his bout with cancer. Always a good team, George and Lisa both declare they are even closer now after having gone through this illness together. He credits Dr. Staggs, Dr. Koch, the doctors in Houston and all those doctors’ staffs with saving his life. And saying thank you to the many individuals who helped him maintain his business and his home during his absence is an almost impossible task since so many people did so quietly, without ever taking credit for their actions.

With God’s help and the help of deeply rooted relationships developed over a lifetime, George Brown persevered and knows that others can fight through their own tests of strength as well. “I feel like there’s an obvious reason I’m here today,” and sharing his story may be part of that reason.

As for God, George declares Him as the main reason he was able to overcome one of the most indescribable years of his life. “I’ve always been a true believer and knew that all things were possible [through Christ], but I knew that if I truly believed this that I had to stand on my faith.” Perhaps as a confirmation of that faith, God sent a quiet reassurance when George needed it most and did so in the loneliest and lowest of times. After one particularly difficult treatment, Brown’s prayers were answered with a sense of peace that convinced the rancher he had been touched by the hand of God. “I knew then that however this thing turned out, I was going to be okay.” ~

