

# The Encourager

Helping People Live Courageously

Vol. 3, No. 3 Summer 1997

A Publication of Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope

## Surviving Cancer— *Attitude Makes a Difference*

By Dave Dravecky

### Attitude

*The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past . . . we cannot change the fact that people will react in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude . . . I am convinced that life is 10% what happens and 90% how I react to it.*

*Charles Swindoll*

From *Strengthening Your Grip*, Charles R. Swindoll, ©1982, Word, Inc., Dallas, TX. Used by permission of Insight for Living, Anaheim, CA 92806



*w*e've all seen it—the attitude that turns an athlete into a champion, that turns an ordinary soldier into a hero, that turns an entertainer into a star, that turns a failure into an honorable legacy. Those of us who are close to cancer and its survivors see it every day as well. We see the attitudes that turn wounded sufferers into survivors.

I know as well as anyone that attitude isn't everything. It won't turn a couch potato into a world-class athlete or an off-key singer into a superstar. As important as attitude is, some patients with inspiring, positive attitudes will succumb to their illness, while others with negative attitudes will survive.

But I do know, having come face to face with cancer in my own life, that I have a different perspective on life, that I approach life with a different attitude. I have come face to face with the reality that life is short and what I do with the time I have is important. For me, cancer sounded an alarm that caused me to react and take action so that I can give the

greatest amount of attention to the things that really matter. I'm certainly not perfect, but my goal is to make every moment count, to learn the lessons that each day brings, to be conscious of the legacy I leave behind.

I know many other cancer survivors have experienced a similar change in perspective and attitude. We hear their stories daily here at the ministry and find ourselves both blessed and challenged by their grateful hearts and courageous attitudes. They have uncovered some of life's greatest secrets and hidden treasures. Gems we would do well to examine. Gems Jan and I feel obligated to share.

These brave souls have taken some of the worst life has to offer and allowed it to mold and shape them for the good. For them, cancer has become a blessing in disguise. Our prayer is that you will be equally blessed and perhaps challenged as they share their incredible journeys. And maybe, you'll pocket a few gems along the way. ♦

## Surviving Cancer – *The Power of a Mother's Love*

In September 1976, Mark-Paul Serafin was a college freshman living a dream come true. An art student since age eleven, he had earned the only full-tuition art scholarship offered by the Rochester Institute of Technology. But on October 26, while studying in his dorm room, he was overcome by excruciating abdominal pain.

"I was rushed to the hospital under the assumption that I was having an appendix attack," he explains, "but upon examination, my physician determined that the problem was a strangulated testicle. He did surgery to prevent the problem from recurring, and within 24 hours I was released to resume my studies."

Just one week later, on November 2, Mark-Paul was overcome by an even greater pain: his father died suddenly from a heart attack. Overwhelmed with grief and the formalities of burying his father, Mark-Paul delayed his post-operative check-up for several weeks. When he was examined, the testicle that had been twisted was still swollen. The doctor then readmitted Mark-Paul for further surgery to remove the affected testicle—and a now-visible tumor. On December 12, Mark-Paul learned from his mother and physician that he had cancer.

*My mother's constant example of persistence, determination, and faith not only got me through my cancer ordeal, but became the very cornerstone of my life.*

His treatment included major surgery to remove all of his chest lymph nodes, followed by chemotherapy every other week for nearly two years. Although his mother lived two hours away, and was still grappling with the pain of her husband's recent death, she was with him for every treatment. "She checked us into a motel and did all she could to make me as comfortable as possible while the horrible effects of chemotherapy took their toll," Mark-Paul recalls.

After several years of horrific treatment with his mom faithfully by his side and a series of follow-up tests, Mark-Paul was able to declare victory over the odds. By the spring of 1980, no evidence of cancer was found. And that was just one of the victories they celebrated. On May 24, 1980, Mark-Paul graduated from college with highest honors. But the celebration didn't end there.

"While she was supporting me during my time of crisis, my Mom had also enrolled in business school. She got her Associate Degree in 1980 too. Her constant example of persistence, determination, and faith not only got me through my cancer ordeal, but became the very cornerstone of my life. She birthed me twice—once nearly forty years ago and then again during my cancer battle."

Although he has been pronounced cured and has doubled his life span since his initial diagnosis, Mark-Paul still has an annual physical, x-rays, and blood work. "When I go for my annual check-up, I often have the opportunity to talk to other men who are battling testicular

cancer. I have been asked everything you can imagine, even to see my scars. I know I'm lucky to be alive and am always willing to comply."

Inspired and influenced by his mother's positive, persistent attitude, Mark-Paul launched into the highly competitive professional art world. Today, Mark-Paul has what he labels a "terrific career" and is currently art director for Datacom Systems, a computer component manufacturer.

In addition to his full-time work, he has a unique hobby drawing celebrity portraits that are donated to non-profit organizations. His work has included drawing portraits of celebrities Whitney Houston, Bill Cosby, Bob Hope, and Debbie Reynolds among many others. The greatest honor, he says, is to draw the portrait of the recipient of the Central New York Leukemia Society's Ernie Davis Courage Award. Dave Dravecky is one of those recipients. "It is a tremendous source of satisfaction," Mark-Paul says, "to have my artwork serve as a testimony not only of my mother's love, but the hope that there is life after a cancer diagnosis." ♦



Dave with Mark-Paul and his mother Barbara-Ann, at the Ernie Davis Courage Award presentation.

Photo: Arnel Photography

### *Blessing in Disguise*

*In the deep of the dark ♦ You fell in as the heart of your world ♦ Went down in flames ♦ To a cauldron of pain  
Seeing no way out ♦ And as you walked through the fire ♦ Losing even desire ♦ It was like a dying swan ♦ To look at you then . . .*



Susan Strong (right) is on staff as an Encourager at the Outreach of Hope. She also encourages her younger sister, Keri (left) who is currently fighting cancer. Susan says, "Having had cancer myself, it is easier not to be afraid for my sister. I know she can get through this."

## Surviving Cancer – *Receiving the Blessing of Life*

By Susan Strong

*"The chief pain of most trials is not the actual suffering itself, but our spirit of resistance toward it."*

Two months after my high school graduation, I was fresh with dreams for the future when a diagnosis of cancer sent me reeling, wondering if I even had a future. I looked up my disease—Hodgkin's lymphoma—in a neighbor's medical dictionary. As I tried to process the information and survival statistics given for my disease, I wondered, *Would I even live to be 20?*

Late one night, long after friends who prayed by my bedside had gone home, I lay in my hospital bed and wrestled with my worst fear: death. I imagined what it would be like to die. I knew that death would bring me into the very presence of God. I closed my eyes and imagined being held and comforted by Jesus. A deep peace and joy enveloped my soul. God's love replaced every anxious thought and fear.

Facing cancer has a way of teaching us about ourselves, our faith, and life. One of the important lessons I learned is that suffering is an inescapable part of life. It is easy to assume that we will grow up, go to college, get a job, have a family, and live happily ever after, but real life isn't like that. We do so much harm to ourselves by expecting life to be free from pain and suffering. How much better it is if we are able to live by accepting what comes our way each day, one moment at a time. A person who is fighting cancer is forced to live that way. The challenge for a survivor and for those who do not have cancer is to learn to live that way every day!

I still remember a quote I discovered during my cancer treatments: "The chief pain of most trials is not the actual suffering itself, but our spirit of resistance toward it." The truth of that statement nearly knocked me over.

I began to practice this principle of surrender during my treatments. With every procedure, every needle, I tried to let go of my resistance and accept what was happening. When I did, I was amazed by how much easier it was for me to get through those painful times. I also recognized that even when I was in treatment, the majority of the moments in my life were good! There were awful moments too, but they were brief. I decided not to spoil the perfectly good moments God gave me by being upset about what had happened or worrying about what I was afraid might happen.

One friend, in particular, was a great help during my cancer experience. I first knew Karen as the mother of one of the boys in my youth group. She had breast cancer and we became "chemo buddies," often meeting for lunch to talk. The difference in our ages didn't matter. We could talk in ways we couldn't talk to anyone else. We each understood what the other was going through.

Three years later, I was in remission and Karen was dying. I had been away at college and hadn't seen her for a while, so we met for lunch the week before I got married.

During our time together, Karen gave me the garter she wore at her wedding. When I called to thank her, I started to cry, "Oh Karen, I feel so guilty that I got better. I am getting married and going on with my life, and you are still suffering."

Her response was a beautiful blessing. "Honey," she said, "I've lived my life. I've been married to a wonderful man for 25 years. I've seen my children grow up. You have all of that ahead of you. Go! Live your life!"

Karen died the day before my wedding. Most brides-to-be don't sleep much the night before their wedding because they are happy and excited. I didn't sleep because I was grieving for my friend. But my wedding day was beautiful. Karen's blessing had released me from the guilt and helped me go on. I proudly wore her garter as a reminder of our friendship and the blessing of life.

I have, as Karen encouraged me to do, gone on to live my life. After five years of remission, I was happily married and pregnant with my miracle son, Grant. Today, 14 years since my diagnosis, cancer seems like something that happened a very long time ago. I rarely think of myself as a cancer survivor. I'm just a normal person, a child of God, who seeks to accept whatever life brings, realizing that God will give me the grace, strength, courage, and humor—whatever I need—to get through each day, one moment at a time. ♦

*But look at you now ♦ You have found a new lease on life ♦ A stronger step and a curious calm on your face  
That you wear as if to say ♦ You can rise from the ashes again ♦ You can rise to the morning that breaks in your eyes  
For what looked like your heart's demise ♦ Has turned out to be ♦ A blessing in disguise . . .*



Bob and Ethel Rose

## Surviving with Cancer – *Finding the Blessings*

*We have come to realize that God has been with us—blessing us—since the beginning.*

**O**n November 7, 1989, thinking he just had an annoying hemorrhoid problem, Bob Rose went to the doctor. But before the physician had even completed the exam, Bob learned that he had cancer—advanced cancer.

Bob and his wife Ethel were totally shocked. Ethel vividly remembers seeing the doctor's lips move but not really hearing his words. As the numbing reality was presented to them, one thing became crystal clear to Bob. "I was amazed by the scriptures that came flooding into my mind. 'I never realized that I knew Bible verses by heart, but they kept coming to mind.'" The powerful truths in those verses came to life, giving Bob a comfort and an anchor that escorted him into the first of eleven major, life-threatening surgeries to arrest the aggressive cancer.

Between surgeries, Bob survived chemotherapy, radiation therapy, an appendectomy, an automobile accident in

which he nearly lost his arm, plus a half dozen or more lesser surgeries (some for the removal of more tumors). Since the day of his diagnosis, he has never been free from the threat of cancer. Every six months he has new tests and his doctors continue to find potentially cancerous growths. Bob has not had the luxury of surviving *from* cancer; he has learned how to survive *with* cancer.

Bob and Ethel have not only learned to survive, but to live and grow in the midst of overwhelming heartache. They have found that they possess special gifts and talents to share with others who are suffering. They have learned to see the blessings that God showers upon them—even in their darkest hours. And there have been plenty of dark hours.

The series of major surgeries Bob endured during the first five years after his diagnosis was overwhelming—for both of them. Every few months he was in the hospital. Each surgery became more difficult to endure. If he wasn't recovering from one surgery, he was preparing for the next.

"I want everyone to know," Bob says, "that Ethel has suffered more than I have. She is the one who has had to deal with the issues of life and the ramifications of my illness. I have been too busy fighting the disease to deal with anything else. Each time I went in for surgery, she did not know whether I was going to live or die. I don't mean to belittle the reality of trusting God because I know that He is trustworthy, but

when you are outside the operating room and give that last kiss good-bye, reality sets in. Those are dark hours."

Ethel agrees. "After a while the surgeries became overwhelming. I didn't want to see Bob go through it anymore. I didn't want to go through it anymore. I wanted it to stop. It wasn't getting any easier. His last surgery was as difficult as the first."

One of the things that got them through those times was prayer. When he undergoes testing and treatment, Bob prays all kinds of prayers. In the more difficult moments, "I sometimes say the Lord's prayer as many times as my brain will do it." And the night before his last major surgery, Ethel remembers exactly what she prayed.

"I didn't know how much more we could go through. I was so upset I wanted to scream," she says. "But I remember thinking of Jesus and what He prayed the night before He was crucified. He told God that He wanted 'to let this cup pass,' to be spared from what was ahead, but more than that He wanted God's will to be done. So I prayed that we would be spared, but if that was not His will that God would give us the strength and courage we needed and that we wouldn't have to face this again."

Since then they have had a reprieve from the major surgeries but have faced a far greater trial. In August 1995, their youngest son—a healthy, athletic, college student—suddenly died. "You never



**Bob  
has not had  
the luxury of surviving  
from cancer; he has  
learned how to survive  
with cancer.**

*It has worked for the good ♦ Like you heard that it could ♦ But it was hard, so hard to believe  
Standing among the ruins of a dream ♦ But from here looking back ♦ You can see clearly that*

*You can gain from things that you lose ♦ And learn many ways by many means ♦ And you have been an inspiration to me . . .*

expect to bury your children,” Bob says. “Nothing I have suffered with cancer touches the loss of our son, Chad.” And less than six months later, Ethel’s father, Clem, died from cancer. At that time Ethel said to a friend, “Sometimes I don’t know who to grieve for first.”

But even in these difficult trials, Bob and Ethel have found moments of joy. “We have come to realize that God has been with us—blessing us—since the beginning,” Bob explains. “It took us a while to recognize some of the blessings, but they have been there all along.” They started looking for and counting those blessings in September, 1990.

“We were in Europe—on a trip I wasn’t supposed to be alive to take,” Bob says. “When we recognized the significance of that, we started to notice the blessings. Through this process we have learned that when struggles come, blessings follow. So when things look bad, we look at each other and ask, ‘I wonder how God is going to bless us this time?’”

Such a change in perspective doesn’t come overnight. It is a process that takes place over time, a process that began when Bob was first diagnosed. “Once I got over the initial shock,” Ethel says, “I had to decide what to do with what I had been told. You either turn it off and deny it, or you face it and address it. Throughout



***I do not believe  
that sheer suffering  
teaches. If suffering alone  
taught, then all the world  
would be wise,  
since everyone suffers.  
To suffering must be added  
mourning, understanding,  
patience, love, openness,  
and the willingness to  
remain vulnerable.***

***Anne Morrow Lindbergh***



***We also rejoice in our  
sufferings because we  
know that suffering  
produces perseverance;  
perseverance, character;  
and character, hope.  
And hope does not  
disappoint us . . .***

*ROMANS 5:3-5 (NIV)*

Bob’s illness there has never been a quick fix or an easy answer. So I have been challenged to look at things a little more honestly, to search diligently in God’s word to find truths I could hold onto, truths that didn’t change.”

One way this new perspective has played out is in Bob and Ethel’s relationship. “Couples often either split or bond in the face of cancer,” explains Bob. “In our case, we were close and drew even closer.” Their closeness was not unnoticed. While their cancer battle raged, another couple in their church, Al and Pat Lynch, also dealt with cancer. Al asked if Bob and Ethel would talk with them because he had observed that Bob and Ethel were dealing with their situation well and that their lives had become even better than before. He wanted to know how in the world that could happen in the face of cancer.

So the two couples got together on a Tuesday evening and talked. The time was so beneficial that they agreed to meet again the next week. And the blessing wasn’t one-sided. Ethel says, “All we did was share our feelings and experiences. We learned that night that others felt the same things we did. Until we talked with that couple, although we had tremendous support from our church family, we didn’t have anyone with whom we could share what was happening deep down inside. It was a new experience for everyone.” That Tuesday-night gathering continues to this day. Now called *Hope in Christ*, it has grown into a support group

for about 35 people who have cancer or are close to someone who does.

“Many people think being involved with suffering and dying people is the most depressing and demoralizing thing. Yet it has brought indescribable blessing to Ethel and me,” Bob notes. “Yes, we cry at times, but we laugh as much as we cry—sometimes more than we cry.”

The greatest blessing has been the incomparable joy of discovering and using the gift of encouragement God has given to them. “My true love,” Bob explains, “is caring for people. Even before I had cancer, I visited people at the hospital. I often beat our pastor to the bedside! And Ethel is especially gifted in caring for people who are dying. It seems that she has always been able to be close to people at that time. Not everyone can do that.”

“Through my battle with cancer, we have been able to *embrace* suffering or dying people. That isn’t normal. It is abnormal to be able to do that on an ongoing basis.” Yet that is exactly what Bob and Ethel believe God has called them to do. “We feel most fulfilled, we feel the greatest joy when we are using the gifts God has given us in this way,” Bob continues.

“If anyone had told us we had this gift, I’m not sure we would have recognized it. We discovered it through my cancer. God used cancer to bring into full blossom the gift of encouraging others that He had already given to us.” Like many other survivors, Bob can now thank God for his cancer. He says it “has broadened my horizons to see so much more of what God can do. He can take something that seems like a catastrophe and make it beautiful.” ♦

***For information on cancer support groups, write “Support Group” in the Special Offer section on the response envelope.***

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*And all the volumes of hope ♦ Your revival can speak ♦ Will always say to me ♦ You can rise from the ashes again  
You can rise to the morning that breaks in your eyes ♦ For what looked like your heart’s demise ♦ Has turned out to be  
A blessing in disguise ♦ It’s turned out to be ♦ A blessing in disguise.*



## *What Cancer Cannot Do*

*Cancer is so limited . . .*

*It cannot cripple Love*

*It cannot shatter Hope*

*It cannot corrode Faith*

*It cannot destroy Peace*

*It cannot kill Friendship*

*It cannot suppress Memories*

*It cannot silence Courage*

*It cannot invade the Soul*

*It cannot steal Eternal Life*

*It cannot conquer the Spirit.*

*Cancer is so limited!*

Author Unknown\*

\*We have seen several versions of this poem, which has been attributed to various sources.  
If you are or know the original author, please let us know so we can give credit where it is due.



## RETURNED TO SENDER!

Letters are a precious gift—to give and to receive. Many such gifts are mailed each week at Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope, and we receive several in return that contain beautiful expressions of love and appreciation. The encouragement others share with us we share with you, because your prayers and support make the delivery of this mail possible . . . both ways. Thank you for encouraging us!



Jim, Carole, & Chris Arnoldi

*You guys have been great!*

*God has, once again, shown Himself to be faithful and sovereign in my life. A surgery that was presented to me as being one of the worst I would have to face became filled with surprises. The doctors thought that complete removal of the liver's right lobe was a must. If they also discovered disease on the left lobe, they were just going to close and let the cancer take its course.*

*Well, the Lord saw it differently! There were eleven tumors on the liver, but they were on the surface and able to be removed. The bottom line is that God has granted me an extension on life beyond what anyone expected with the type of rare cancer I have.*

*I sure have much to rejoice about, even though the battle continues. That it continues at all borders on the miraculous. God says rejoice always. I think we all struggle with the "always" part, but I have found that I learn more in the valleys than I ever did on the mountaintop. . . . Although I can hope for better health, what I need to rest in is the promise that God will sustain me in all circumstances and provide me a residence in His presence, no matter what.*

*I find that people tend to spend much time seeking a way out of a situation rather than pleading with God for a way through it. Since cancer took hold of me, I have found that praying for acceptance is far more comforting in the long haul. . . . It's not as if God "got the wrong guy" when trials befall us. The trials are meant to provide the classroom for our learning.*

*We can gain so much from our difficulties that we shouldn't waste time looking for the way out. Haven't we heard so many say, after much suffering, "I've never felt so close to God?" We can rejoice in our suffering. We can be thankful in all things, in all ways.*

*Wow! There I go again. All I really wanted to do is express my deepest thanks for your love and concern.*

*Jim Arnoldi  
Peachtree City, GA*

*Dear Mr. Dravecky,*

*I have just finished reading the book you wrote (Dave Dravecky). I was inspired by your book. It taught me not to give up no matter what the situation is.*

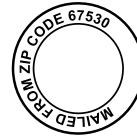
*I couldn't imagine how people looked at you or how hard it is to live with one arm.*

*When you wrote the book you probably wanted to touch at least one person. If that was your goal, it was fulfilled. I know that because you touched someone—it was me.*

*Peter Shaw  
Livonia, MI  
Age 11*

*The staff and volunteers at Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope dedicate this issue of The Encourager to the more than 7.4 million cancer survivors in America today. Your courage inspires us to live each day to its fullest, to be thankful for every blessing God grants us, and to walk in greater compassion with those who are suffering.*


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PRESIDENT Dave Dravecky  
EDITOR Amanda Sorenson  
DESIGNER Beverly Seefeldt

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### *Our Mission*

Offering comfort, hope, and encouragement through Jesus Christ to those who suffer from cancer or amputation. We accomplish this mission by offering prayer support, personal contact, correspondence, resource referral, and the gift of encouraging literature.



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A Publication of Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope

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