

The Encourager

Helping People Live Courageously

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A Publication of Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope

***“And if one member suffers,
all the members suffer with it. . . .”***

The apostle Paul referring to the family of
Christ in 1 CORINTHIANS 12:26

All in the Family When Cancer Comes Home

by Dave Dravecky



Many people know that I had cancer, but many people don't know that although I was the patient, I wasn't the only one who suffered. My whole family battled cancer. Not one of us escaped its grasp.

When cancer comes home, every member of the family is launched on a new and challenging journey. Nobody knows quite what to do. Jan and I didn't know what to do. We bumbled our way through it. We handled some things remarkably well, but in other ways we fell flat on our faces.

From the very beginning, we were totally honest with our children. That was good. It was also scary, especially when amputation became necessary. You see, our six-year-old son Jonathan was afraid of people who had physical handicaps. If he

saw a child who was deformed, he panicked. He ran away from children in wheelchairs. Although we did our best to prepare him for the amputation of my arm by telling him the truth, answering his questions, and addressing his fears, we didn't know how he would respond.

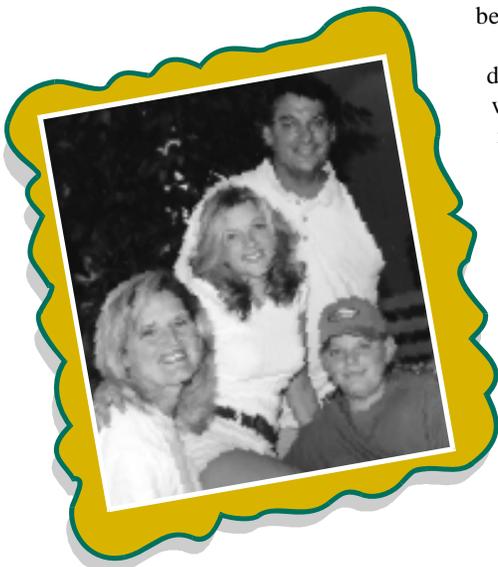
When I came home following the amputation, Jonathan stared at me for a long time. Then he ran outside and gathered up his friends. They called me into the garage and Jonathan said, "Dad, take off your shirt. Show 'em where they cut your arm off." So I did. They all looked at the fresh wound and said, "Oh, gross!" then they ran outside to play. That was how Jonathan broke the ice and began accepting what had happened to me. Today he no longer fears physical handicaps. Instead, a deep compassion for those who suffer has been built into his character.

I wish I could say that Jan and I handled cancer as a couple as well as we did with our children, but we didn't. Just as intense heat brings the impurities in gold ore to the surface, the pressure of cancer brings a couple's flaws and impurities into the open. Jan describes that time best: "For a time, Dave was angry. Although I knew his heart and didn't lack love for him, I didn't like seeing that ugly side of him. And I didn't handle my role as caretaker well. I ended up depressed, burned out, and guilt-ridden. At the time my husband really needed me, I

fell apart. My weakness was frustrating to both of us." Despite our unfailing commitment to one another, we fell apart to the point that my parents needed to come into our home and care for us for six weeks because Jan and I had become incapable of doing it ourselves.

We don't know exactly what you face on your cancer journey because every individual and family responds to the demands of cancer in their own way. But we do know that cancer is difficult for everyone in the family and that each member's response has a dramatic impact on the other members. Some people are able to pull together and work through the process. They don't experience the same things Jan and I experienced. Other families are just like us and have to deal with difficult, often ugly, issues. And in some families the crisis is so great that the marriage doesn't survive.

We certainly don't have all the answers. We don't offer a formula of dos and don'ts when cancer comes home. But we are willing to share a glimpse of our cancer experience and the experiences of others in the hope that it will encourage you and help you press on and endure the journey as a family. You are not alone in dealing with these issues. Many other families, through loving acceptance of one another and open, honest communication, are learning how to deal with cancer when it comes home. ♦





When Cancer Comes Home

The Forgotten Spouse

The Bible describes a married couple as becoming “one flesh” (see Genesis 2:24). And the union that marriage brings is felt keenly when one has to battle cancer. Although only one of the members of that union may be diagnosed with the disease, both are profoundly affected by it. In fact, many cancer patients say that the cancer battle is actually more difficult for their well spouse. One patient said, “My wife 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.”

Yet while the cancer battle rages, the needs of the well spouse are often overlooked. And those needs are great. When one spouse is diagnosed with cancer, the scales of responsibility tip heavily in the well spouse’s direction. The well spouse runs from home front to battlefield offering updates, providing moral support, and stocking both fronts with necessary supplies.

Comfortable and secure daily routines are upended for everyone in the family, particularly the well spouse. The wife who stayed home to care for her family may find herself struggling to adjust to her new role as sole provider. She may feel guilty over her inability to “be there” for her children. The husband whose wife has handled most of the household and family responsibilities suddenly finds his orderly and efficient home in chaos. He struggles to balance career, household duties, and family activities.

Even more unsettling are the sudden, dramatic changes that occur in the couple’s relationship. The primary caregiver in the family may become the care receiver. The breadwinner may be unable to work and may watch helplessly as the well spouse increases the workload in order to make

ends meet. In addition to role changes, the well spouse must carry the additional load of routine tasks that the sick spouse can no longer manage. The relational stresses that these adjustments bring are significant—even when circumstances are ideal. Imagine going through them under cancer’s looming shadow!

So it’s not uncommon for a well spouse to feel utterly overwhelmed and totally alone. If you find yourself in this situation, it’s important to realize that your feelings of inadequacy are not due to weakness or lack of character—the reality is, your life has been turned upside down. Furthermore, much of what you face you face alone. Your spouse is often unable to provide adequate support and most people around you don’t realize the burden you carry.

But you are not alone. Many other husbands and wives walk the same lonely, difficult road. They, too, are weighted down by a similar burden. At the Outreach of Hope, we hear the anguish of your hearts:

We can’t talk about my fears. She has her own. And if we combined our fears, the emotional weight would bury us alive.

We never talk about the little things anymore. There are too many big things clamoring for our time and attention.

We haven’t held each other for so long. Our time is totally consumed with treatment schedules, trips to the

pharmacy, insurance paperwork, and trying to juggle our dwindling resources.

I feel so selfish if I share my needs. They can’t begin to compare with her daily struggle of treatment, its side effects, and the emotional and spiritual weight of her cancer battle.

It’s confusing, frightening, and exhausting to be the well spouse. As the main support person for the family, the well spouse often “runs on empty”—meeting everyone’s needs but his or her own. They may deny their own pain or the severity of their condition in order to keep from adding more stress to an already stressful situation. But just as the deposit/withdrawal principle applies to a bank account, it applies to our emotional, physical, and spiritual health. When a well spouse neglects taking time for rest, reflection, or refreshment, the account will eventually be overdrawn, putting the well spouse at risk for illness or depression. While others focus their attention on the battlefield—on the cancer patient—the needs of the well spouse remain unnoticed and unmet. But when the well spouse suffers, everyone in the family suffers.

So those who would be encouragers to a family or couple suffering under cancer’s attack would do well to step back from the battlefield and notice the weary soul behind the action. As one cancer patient said, “People always call and want to know how I am doing. But I want them to ask my wife how she is doing. I want someone to worry and fuss over her. That’s the best thing they can do for me.” ♦

When Cancer Comes Home *Nurturing Your Marriage*

Pray together consistently. Prayer is a great source of strength and unity for any couple, and it can be particularly helpful when you face a crisis. Statistics show that couples who pray regularly together have fewer marital conflicts. So practice bringing God into your situation. Set aside a regular time to pray with one another over each day's needs and express the concerns that weigh on each of your hearts.

Recognize that both of you have needs—needs that you may never have had before. Be consistent and persistent in finding out your spouse's needs, even the ones you aren't able to meet personally. When you care enough to ask and then pray for the needs you aren't able to meet, you send a powerful message of love and concern.

Work at two-way communication. Conversations between spouses often focus on the daily cancer battle. Make an effort to focus conversation on the well spouse too. And when you talk, share about more than just the events that are happening around you. Focus on the personal side of the challenges you each face. Share how you are feeling about and dealing with those challenges on the emotional and spiritual levels.

Encourage refreshment. Both the patient and the well spouse need times of rest and enjoyment. So give one another permission *and your blessing* to do something enjoyable. An overnight stay or a special outing with one of the children might be just what's needed to provide a renewed perspective.

Accept help. If someone offers to help with daily tasks or household chores, jump at the opportunity to lighten the load. Make sure children in the family are carrying their share of household responsibilities as well. They sometimes slack off on home responsibilities when their parents are preoccupied, and (despite their protests) their sense of security and self-esteem will be enhanced when they help out.

Enlist help. Your church, neighbors, relatives, friends, hospice, and cancer support groups are available to help shoulder the burden. Use their services. Be open to seeking wise counsel. A third party will often help you see things more clearly. You don't have to "go it alone."

When Cancer Comes Home

I Thought It Was Only Us

by Jan Dravecky

When Dave had cancer, it seemed as if it was just happening to us—to Dave, the children, and me. It wasn't until years later that I began to understand that cancer happened to Dave's parents and brothers as well.

We maintained close contact with Dave's parents throughout his cancer battle, and they made a ton of sacrifices for us. Despite our close contact, I was so overwhelmed by my pain that I overlooked the depth of pain they were experiencing. When Dave had his third surgery, we were living in Ohio and the hospital was in New York. I planned to go to New York with Dave, but the children would stay in Ohio. As they had so many times before, Dave's parents asked how they could help. I told them that it was hard for me to leave the children but that I felt best when the children were in their care. So they cared for our children in Ohio while a friend accompanied me to New York.



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I had no idea at the time how difficult that was. Dave's Mom had been by his side for all of his previous surgeries, and she has since said that being in Ohio while her son was in surgery hundreds of miles away was the hardest thing she's ever had to do. I regret that I overlooked their parental love for their adult son and was not more sensitive to their pain. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices they made for us during that difficult time. ♦



When Cancer Comes Home

A Glimpse Into a Child's World

There's no such thing as a small soul.

ANONYMOUS

Children may be small in stature, but we adults make a critical error if we assume that their smaller stature mirrors a lesser capacity to experience emotion, spiritual depth, and heartbreak. The minds, souls, and spirits of children are just as real, viable, and dynamic as those of adults. So when cancer comes to their home, they may feel its presence just as profoundly and powerfully as adults—they simply lack the wisdom gained from life experiences to help them understand and cope with this mysterious, unwelcome, and threatening intruder. They need the wise guidance of adults to help them navigate cancer's troubled waters.

What children rarely lack, however, is the ability to be honest and the willingness to share how they see things. Notice the honesty and depth of feeling in eleven-year-old Mark Haskin's letter to Dave about his brother's cancer:

When I heard the bad news, I didn't know what to think. I didn't know if I was sad or mad or if I was afraid. The reason I didn't know how to feel was because I didn't know what cancer was. But when my parents told me it is an illness that some people could die from, I was kind of sad and afraid at the same time.

Soon my brother Brian started getting chemotherapy treatments. That is when I started feeling sorry for him. I felt sorry for him because he got his treatments through needles. At home he had to get a shot once a day. I usually got his stuffed animal for him because he wanted something to squeeze when he was getting his shot. When he was at the hospital getting his treatments, I visited him there. I would look at him all sick and miserable, lying in his bed. I just felt like taking his place so he could feel better and be

able to run around and play with his friends. But on the other hand, I was thinking, I'm glad I'm not in his shoes.

Sometimes I was mad because there were things I wanted to do, like have a friend sleep over, but I couldn't because Brian was in the hospital and my parents had to be with him. It seemed like it was spoiling my life.

At night when I was lying in bed I would ask God, "Why does this have to happen to Brian? If we lost him it would destroy our whole family." Then I realized that God has a reason for everything He does and I know that it is a good reason, even though it does not seem like it at the time.

Brian has been cancer free for almost one year now. When I lie in bed now I thank God for healing Brian and answering my prayers.

Parents who realize how deeply their well children feel cancer's impact and make efforts to bring them along the journey are a great help to their children. In Mark's case,

his parents told him the truth. He knew the illness was serious. He connected with what his brother was going through. He had the opportunity to express compassion for his brother by supporting him through prayer and practical assistance.

But it isn't easy for parents to know where to draw the line on truth—how much they should tell or when. One guideline is to remember that your goal is trust. Trust is the glue that holds a family together, and trust is built on truth. How much truth should be shared varies with each child's age, temperament, and emotional maturity because no two children will react to the same information in the same way.

One obstacle to telling the truth is fear of how the child will react. A child's crying or display of intense emotion may be uncomfortable or even unpleasant, but it is normal and appropriate to feel deep and disturbing feelings when a family member is seriously ill. On the other extreme, some children are slow to express their feelings openly and may need encouragement, even

Help for Kids

See page 7 for resources available through the Outreach of Hope. Other helpful resources specifically for children:

Kids Konnected, a support group for kids who have a parent with cancer, can be reached at 714-380-4334 or website www.kidskonnected.org.

When Your Brother or Sister Has Cancer, is a free publication from the American Cancer Society, 1-800-ACS-2345, www.cancer.org.

Helping Kids Cope With the Truth, is a free resource sheet available through the Outreach of Hope. Write "Kids Cope" in the Special Offer section of the enclosed order form.



“permission,” to do so. When children aren’t given a safe, loving environment in which to express their deep emotions, they may, like a shaken soda can, explode under the pressure.

Although it may seem easier to ignore the truth, the potential consequences of shielding children from it are devastating. Children will sense that something is wrong. They will feel anxiety. And when they aren’t told the truth, they will draw their own conclusions—wrong conclusions. They may, for example, conclude that they are to blame for what is happening, assume that things are far worse than they really are, or fear that the cancer will spread to them. These are terrible burdens for children to bear.

Just by knowing what is going on, children can begin to cope. By actively teaching their children to cope with the reality of cancer, parents are teaching them how to live successfully, and that’s what a parent’s job is. As Dr. Wendy Harpham says, “The greatest gift you can give your children is not protection from change, loss, pain or stress, but the confidence and tools to cope and grow with all that life has to offer.”*

Of course we need wisdom to know when, what, and how to tell our children the truth—and wisdom is available to us. The Bible promises, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). So ask God to give you the wisdom to know what to say and the discernment to discover and touch the needs of your child’s heart.

Wisdom is needed because your task isn’t easy. When the whirlwind of life with cancer strikes a family, spiritual and emotional needs increase just as the time and energy to meet them decreases. No matter how attentive or committed a parent you are, some needs will go unmet.

One night, Debra Johnson discovered an unmet need. Her son Andrew had recently undergone a below-the-knee amputation to arrest the spread of bone cancer. As Debra tucked her six-year-old daughter Natalie into bed, Natalie slowly and deliberately looked over her entire body. Finally she announced that she wanted to have her little finger amputated! Debra convinced her otherwise, but the request revealed how much Natalie, the youngest of five children, missed the attention her brother was now receiving.

Even in the midst of the whirlwind,

Dave Dravecky’s Outreach of Hope

parents can take steps to minimize cancer’s impact:

✓ As much as possible, allow children to maintain their own interests and activities. Doing so will help them feel normal. It will help them realize that life will go on and that they can pursue their dreams. If needed, enlist the help of others to drive them to lessons, sports events, and birthday parties.

✓ Stick to the same family routine whenever possible. Bedtime, mealtime, chores, and behavioral rules shouldn’t change. Structure nurtures stability and security—key components of emotional well-being.

✓ Watch for warning signs that a child is struggling—behavioral and sleep changes, trouble at school, and difficulties with friends. If you suspect trouble, set aside special time with that child—perhaps a meal at the child’s favorite restaurant, seeing a movie, or taking a walk. Provide the environment and attention they need to share what’s troubling them. If needed, seek the help of a pastor or counselor.

And remember, no matter how hard you try, you can’t do it all. Early in her husband Chad’s battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease, Beth Risley recognized her limitations in meeting her children’s individual needs. She knew outside help was essential, so for the past fifteen years she has prayed this prayer: *You are my Father and the true Father of our children. Please help my children to trust You. Please answer their questions, be there when I can’t, and watch over them. Make me aware of the needs in their life that I can meet. I trust You to meet the rest.*

Her prayer points to the one reality in the unpredictable life of cancer that is predictable—the loving care of our heavenly Father. He is the only one who knows for sure what will happen, will never leave them, can heal their deepest hurts and wounds. He is the sure and steadfast anchor they need the most.

By teaching our children to trust God and seek Him daily, we strengthen their ability to cope and even grow through the hardship of cancer. As with any other truth we seek to teach our children, they learn best from our example. As they watch our faith displayed daily, it reinforces their own. And this most important training comes with a written guarantee: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6). ♦

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WHEN CANCER COMES HOME A Child’s Essay

by Brandon Clements

Mom—my one and only one. She takes care of me when I’m sick or hurt. She helps me with my work. She cheers me up when I’m down and have the blues.

So I know why God made moms. But now it’s the other way around because my mom got diagnosed with cancer on May 16, 1996. So now it’s my turn to pay her back for all the times she was there for me.

So it’s been a hard four months with chemo and radiation and being in the hospital six times. But some good news, she is almost done.

Mom, I never told you this, but when you give me a kiss before I go to school it makes me want to cry and I wish I could take your place. Sometimes I feel like I want to quit school and be with you every step of the way. I dedicate this to Marilyn Clements, my Mom.

Brandon Clements was 10 years old when he wrote this Mother’s Day essay for school.

WHEN CANCER COMES HOME

How Family & Friends Can Help

Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard? Was not my soul grieved?

JOB 30:25

When cancer takes up residence in a home, caring friends and extended family members often want to help, but don't know how. If you find yourself in such a situation, the following suggestions may help your encouragement touch the hurting hearts of not just one person, but the whole family.

Remember the ripple rule! Like the impact of a stone plunging into a pond, the impact of cancer on a patient ripples out and touches every member of the patient's family. A sensitive encourager will not only seek to encourage the patient, but will follow the ripple out and encourage the spouse, the children, the parents—everyone in its path. Instead of sending greeting cards exclusively to the patient, for example, you may want to consider addressing a card to the whole family, or sending individual cards to each family member.

Make contact. A surprising number of would-be encouragers never take the first step toward establishing appropriate communication. When cancer comes home, few family members have the energy to seek out encouragers. So commit yourself to contacting the family and making yourself available. If you don't know every family member well, begin by expressing care for the member you do know. You can send a card, make a phone call, or prepare a treat for the family to enjoy. If you know only a child in the family, you could express your awareness of the family situation to one of the parents and ask how he or she would like you to encourage that child.

Offer to be a sounding board. Cancer patients and their families are on a roller coaster ride of emotions. At times they are caught unaware by a burst of anger, sorrow, or fear. A safe, available person who can listen well when a patient's spouse, parent, or child needs to "let off steam" is a strong support for a family dealing with cancer. Someone who gives the freedom for family members to express their feelings in a safe, loving setting will help them work through the many feelings that can

be troubling their hearts.

Remember, it's usually more important to listen than to speak. Guard against making judgments about what is said. Instead, share supportive, life-giving words. The Bible has some good suggestions:

👉 *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

James 1:19

👉 *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*

Romans 12:15

👉 *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

Colossians 4:6

👉 *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal . . . Love is patient, love is kind. . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*

1 Corinthians 13:1-8

Recognize the family's spiritual needs. The well members of a cancer patient's family, particularly the primary care giver, need spiritual strength to walk in God's wisdom, discernment, and peace on a daily basis. And in the midst of their struggle, family members may go through a difficult period of questioning God—His goodness, faithfulness, or love for them. So pray for the family's spiritual needs as well as the emotional and physical ones. Consider providing a prayer partner for each family member. You could also send a devotional book, a new Bible, or a book of encouragement.

Just do it! It's all too easy to say, "Let me know if there's anything I can do for you." No matter how sincere the offer, a family that is dealing with cancer may not have the energy to take you up on it. You may be able to offer greater support if you call and say, "I'm going to the store. What can I pick up for you?" or "We're going to the park, would your children be able to go with us?" There may well be other daily or weekly tasks, such as providing transportation or meals, that you can commit to providing.



When Cancer Comes Home And You Find Yourself Alone

We know that the cancer battle isn't always fought amidst a company of family members and friends. Some who face cancer fight on a very lonely battlefield. For these individuals, cancer doesn't come home to much of a family.

Some individuals have never married, so they do battle without the love and support (and the accompanying trials, concerns, complications) of a life partner. Some have no children to worry about, to explain things to, nor do they experience the delight and joy that children can bring to even the darkest hours. Others have no living parents to care for them, to worry over them.

Some start their cancer battle with a

spouse at their side, but in the heat of the battle, their spouse abandons them. Physically sick and deeply wounded emotionally, they are left to muster their resources and battle on alone, often shouldering the full burden of financial provision and care for their children.

Then, too, some fight valiantly beside a stricken spouse and one day awaken on the unfamiliar and strangely deserted battlefield of death. The cancer battle over, they must pick up what remains of their shattered family life and continue on alone.

Yes, cancer does find its way into some lonely homes. If you find yourself in this situation, our heart goes out to you. We want you to know that there is hope. You

don't have to remain alone.

You have a heavenly Father who loves you and cares for you deeply. Ask Him to help you find the supportive friendships, the family you need. He may use long-lost relatives, neighbors, a cancer support group, your local church, or friends to provide comfort and encouragement. But the most important friend is Jesus. The Bible describes Him as one who "is near to the brokenhearted" and the "friend who sticks closer than a brother." So invite Him into your home. Allow Him to fill your heart with peace, grace, mercy, and love. He has promised to "never leave or forsake you." ♦

When Cancer Comes Home Resources to Help You Cope

Stand by Me

by Dave & Jan Dravecky with Amanda Sorenson

If you've ever been at a loss as to how to encourage a hurting friend, help has arrived! This 5 1/2" by 5 1/2" gift book is not only filled with practical ideas for showing how much you care, it helps you understand the heart and heartaches of those who suffer. A handy companion for cancer patients and those who care, it makes a great gift too! To order, check the appropriate box on the enclosed order form. \$8.00



Do Not Lose Heart

by Dave & Jan Dravecky with Steve Halliday

This inviting collection of 28 heartfelt devotions offers a legacy of wisdom and encouragement for those who struggle amidst the adversities of life. Individual devotions convey the message that yes, life is hard, pain and suffering are real, but there is more—there is an eternal reality on which we can focus and not lose heart! Beautifully illustrated by Thomas Kinkadee, this hardcover volume makes an excellent gift—one that will be reread and treasured for years to come. To order, check the appropriate box on the enclosed order form. \$10.00



Cancer Lives at Our House

by Beatrice Hofman Hoek with Melanie Jongsma

A fifteen-year cancer survivor, Beatrice Hoek knows what happens when cancer comes home. A short, easy read, the book provides insight and empathy for families who battle cancer. Topics covered include dealing with stress, confronting fear, expressing feelings constructively, journaling, recognizing when siblings feel neglected, and addressing the big issues—pain, suffering, and doubts about God. To order, write Our House on the enclosed order form. \$8.00



Heaven's Not a Crying Place

by Joey O'Connor

A handbook for teaching children about death, funerals, and the life beyond, this book can be a tremendous help to those who are facing a terminal illness. Its tender understanding of difficult issues provides an abundance of comfort and hope. Much of what this book offers is helpful in dealing with non-terminal cancer and other adversities as well. To order, write Crying Place on the enclosed order form. \$10.00



From Our Family to Yours



The family at the Outreach of Hope dedicates this issue of *The Encourager* to the eight million cancer patients in our nation and their families. We are wholly and passionately dedicated to extending God's love and encouragement to you in the midst of your battle.

Sunday, June 7, 1998 is National Cancer Survivor's Day.

The Encourager is free, a gift from us to you. Now that you've read it, become an encourager yourself and share this gift with someone you know who needs uplifting. Don't throw the gift away . . . pass it along!

President	Dave Dravecky
Vice President	Jan Dravecky
Editorial Director	Kim Jones
Editor	Amanda Sorenson
Designer	Beverly Seefeldt
Photographer	Bob Knepper

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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.



13840 Gleneagle Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80921

Phone: 719 481-3528

Fax: 719 481-4689

E-mail: info@outreachofhope.org
Internet: www.outreachofhope.org

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Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope
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Colorado Springs, CO 80921

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