Jerry D. Kline: A Survivor’s Story

July 2013

This story begins in January 2004, when I began to experience a series of severe headaches. I had not had significant numbers of headaches up to that point, no more than other people get now and then. But the headaches that started on January 8th were a different matter. They would come out of nowhere and subside just as quickly as they came - lasting only two or three minutes. My wife and I initially thought they were sinus related or tension based, but as the headaches persisted and as I moved up the chain of specialists, I eventually found myself carrying MRI film to a neurologist’s appointment. It was on 30 January 2004 that I heard the dreadful words “I’m sorry Mr. Kline, but you have a brain tumor.”

Hearing those words was like hitting a brick wall at 90 mph – my whole world came crashing down in an instant all around me while I stood by helplessly watching. I immediately went to see neurosurgeon Dr. Sam Finn, and heard my first bit of good news within a couple of hours of the bad news. “Yes, you have a brain tumor,” Dr. Finn said, “but it is eminently operable.” He started me on 32 mg/day of the steroid Decadron to reduce the swelling being caused by the tumor. The Decadron also dismissed the headaches and it felt great to feel great.

On 02 February 04, I received a prayer pager from the First Baptist Church of Richardson. When a person prays for me, they call my pager’s number and enter “777#”, the universal code for “someone is praying for you.” Zip Codes are often entered in place of "777" and this is actually preferred, as I can lookup the Zip and see the origin. This pager continues to be a tremendous source of encouragement and comfort, even to this day. I have received thousands of pages at all hours of the day and night, wherever I go.

The tumor was removed during a three hour procedure on 04 February 04. The medical staff at Baylor in Dallas was nothing short of brilliant. They inserted several “ports” into my body and while we conversed, they began to take me under. The next thing I remember was the chief anesthesiologist saying “Jerry, we’re done.” All I could say to him was “fantastic, fantastic.” Two days later, I had an MRI and was pronounced clean by the radiologist and the medical staff. That same day, I went home with strict orders to rest for one week. After a follow up meeting with Dr. Finn, I returned to work nine days after the surgery.

Having learned that my tumor was a grade 4 glioblastoma multiforme (gbm), I began to research brain cancer treatments and to try to figure out how to approach this whole situation. Having the tumor removed was a “no brainer,” given its location slightly above my right ear, but what should I do after surgery? With the help of my wife Kathy, my mother and my brother David, we developed a plan. Our approach was “total war” with no holds barred, no mercy shown and no prisoners taken. We decided to be as aggressive with this traitor as my body would allow.

Post operative treatments consisted of six weeks of conformal radiation therapy with concurrent Temodar chemotherapy. My blood was checked every week during this time. A significant percentage of my hair fell out, but most of it eventually returned.

After this, Kathy and I visited MD Anderson, Duke, and UT Southwestern to identify follow on treatment options for the long haul. We also consulted with gbm survivors, like Dr. Ben Williams. I read articles and books. I spent hours on the internet. I beseeched the Lord for wisdom and direction.

I eventually ended up at the office of Dr. Virginia Stark-Vance, a truly remarkable oncologist who takes an optimistic view of things, even a gbm diagnosis. The plan we elected was to take 14 days of Temodar (a pill), then stop the Temodar for 14 days. I also took Accutane with the Temodar. We then checked my blood to see how my system is holding up, and then the cycle was repeated. Every two months, a MRI was performed, and by the grace of God, I had 21 consecutively clean scans over a 40 month period. One scan was a PET, the others standard MRIs.

A spot was identified from the MRI on 01 June 07. We began hitting this small, suspect area on Monday, 04 June 07, followed by monthly MRIs, and as of the scan of 08 Sept 07, the beast had vanished! Two more rounds of Carbo and Avastin were therefore administered over the next two months, and the monthly scans remained clean, so I returned to bi-monthly MRIs and halted the chemo and Avastin in November 2007.

Another spot was identified from the MRI on 13 March 09. The bombardment of this very small area with chemo began on Monday, 16 March 2009. This spot was eliminated with just one chemo infusion. Two more months of chemo and clean scans followed, but this time I decided to stay on chemo for a fourth cycle. The idea was to keep Carboplatin in my system long enough to kill the tumor once and for all. I was taking a proactive chemo stance, rather than waiting to react to a third tumor occurrence.

Unfortunately, the additional cycle of Carboplatin did not preclude the tumor from returning for a third time, this time a 4mm by 3mm oval, difficult to spot, but easily sacked again using the dynamic duo of Carbo and Avastin. "The spot is not," noted my radiologist after the first round of chemo in April 2010. Slices of my tumor from 2004 were sent to a genetic lab in Arizona. I explored additional meds to take to eliminate the tumor before it tried to make a fourth appearance, but the tumor responded before I did.

November 2010 found me with a fourth recurrent tumor, but the little degenerate was only about 2mm. The radiologist's report referred to a "subtle" area of enhancement seen on the Sagittal and the Axial sequences. The fact that it is seen on two sequences means it's less likely to be an artifact. It was definitely a difficult call, but when in doubt, wash it out, I say. We hit it with CPT-11, Carboplatin and Avastin immediately and continued until three clean monthly MRIs were obtained. All chemo was discontinued and I returned to bi-monthly MRIs in February 2011, but my respite was short-lived; the pig came back for encounter number 5 In June 2011. BCNU was the chosen agent of destruction this time. Nearly one year was required for my platelets to recover from two BCNU infusions.

The swine hit the replay button once more in July 2012. Procarbazine and Carboplatin and were initially used to address this 3mm thread. It is not changing structurally, and a PET scan from September 2012 showed no abnormal glucose update, so I am taking Temodor and getting scanned each month as of October 2012, continuing thru July 2013.

This story has been captured in paperback, eBook and Audio Book formats and is available on amazon.com, bn.com and iTunes (Search for *An Unremarkable Man*). All net proceeds from sales are donated to brain tumor organizations, such as the Legacy Brain Foundation and the Mission 4 Maureen Foundation.

Through all of this, I have enjoyed the unfaltering support of my family, several churches, friends, neighbors, co-workers, cancer survivors. More than this, I have seen the Lord at work as never before; mostly working on me and my fears. He is my strong tower, my Good Shepherd and my Abba Father who treats me with compassion and tenderness. I would not want to go through this again, but my faith now has an experiential component that provides a validation of the Bible that I have been studying most of my life. I bow my knees and thank the Lord Jesus Christ!

The film on the left is from Jan 2004 (pre-op). The right image is the first recurrence (June 2007). The bottom left shot is a clean MRI (Nov 2008) and the second recurrence is shown in the bottom right.