

**I'M STILL AIMING TO BE THE BEST
PATIENT MY DOCTOR HAS EVER HAD
RICK BONELLI, VOA PATIENT**

My experience living with multiple myeloma began six years ago. I was 49 and worked for the Naval Facility Engineering Command. I was a fitness nut - running 10K's and practicing martial arts. In January of 02, I noticed a little tenderness in my lower back after running. It was after moving a large bush; however, that I began to investigate my health. I thought I hurt a disk in my back, but X-rays proved no evidence of a slipped disk. My spine, according to technicians, looked like Swiss cheese. I had a lot of lesions.

Doctors checked a variety of things. Before too long, my doctor said, "The only thing left is multiple myeloma." Additional tests were conclusive. My wife knew it was a form of cancer, but no one in my family had ever heard of it. I wasn't really scared after I learned about my disease. I knew all the symptoms would pass. My biggest question was, "Where do we go?" The little lesions were everywhere, but I was always optimistic. I told everyone that I would die from something else.

Through research, I learned about stem cell transplantation. I was interested in that option and explored different opinions. Dr. McGaughey was the third of 3 doctors to confirm that stem cell transplants were a viable option for me. At the time, I pursued a clinical trial for stem cell transplants using donor stem cells. It was potentially curative, hence attractive. One of my siblings was even a ten out of ten match! Dr. McGaughey, however, suggested trying my own stem cells first, which is far less risky. My first stem cell transplant was during the holiday of 2002.

Our primary objective from that point was to try and maintain my disease – keep it at a low burn, if you will. Once my cancer was under control, I had serious back surgery. Titanium rods were inserted on either side of the spine. I have a lot of fun at airports!

Incidentally, I came out of remission. In the Fall of 07, I retired from my job and agreed to another stem cell transplant. It was performed at VOA as an outpatient. That is when I met Cindy Cutter. From the moment I met her, I knew she would take care of me. She could anticipate what I was feeling or experiencing. I felt like I met a friend.

In the Spring of 08, I got time off for "good behavior" [err, good counts!]. Shortly thereafter, my old employer contacted me. I didn't realize I missed working so much. It is better this time around, since I am not the boss.

When I was first diagnosed, I would visualize friends in my dojo doing battle with cancer. My approach is now more faith-based. I'm still aiming to be the best patient Dr. McGaughey has ever had. But I'm resigning myself to the will of the Lord. I cannot spend time worrying about things. Am I going to jump in the grave? Not at all.

Now that things are stabilizing, I feel more optimistic than ever. Whether or not I'll ever be cured of multiple myeloma is really not the point. It's can I keep it at a level where it does no more damage to me, and I can do like I'm doing right now. I can go play and do what I want to do. I can enjoy friends and the family around me.