

Beyond Words

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SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT

A bout with leukemia took Tom Gallant – and others – on a journey of discovery

COVER STORY

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFERY TERPSTRA

ON SPECIAL



ASSIGNMENT

A BOUT WITH LEUKEMIA LED TOM GALLANT ON A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Tom Gallant went to the hospital's emergency room last October to receive treatment for a wound on his left leg that wouldn't heal.

He and his wife, Liz, assumed it was from a spider bite. They assumed he would get the necessary care and go home.

Those assumptions were soon dashed.

Instead, the Sunday night excursion to Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus was the start of a special assignment – which began with the disquieting news that Tom's blood test confirmed he had leukemia.

That was the start for Tom, Grand Rapids First's business administrator and treasurer, on a journey that developed into a bigger purpose that included, but went beyond, the healing of his body.

HIS PLAN AND PURPOSE

He was immediately admitted to the hospital and his assignment soon began. That same night Tom received the assurance from a sovereign, living God that He was directing His plan and purpose in his life.

Tom was assured he didn't need to worry, that the leukemia wasn't a death sentence, but that he was being given a special assignment while at Butterworth.

"It eased my concerns," says Tom.

And it did more than that.

God's presence continued to bathe him.

REST IN MY JOY

A few days later the Lord took Tom back to the age when he accepted Christ – 8.

"He reminded me of my salvation experience, how elated I was to be saved," explains Tom. "He said, 'Rest in My joy. I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

On that same day, a woodcarving was delivered to him, given to him by another business administrator of a local church. The carving declares NEVER ALONE with a heart in

the middle. In the middle of the heart is a cross. The well-timed gift confirmed to Tom that the Lord would never leave him or forsake him.

NOT JUST FOR CANCER WARD

During his 43-day stay at Butterworth Tom encouraged fellow patients facing life-threatening diseases to trust in Christ. But this message of hope wasn't just contained on the hospital cancer ward. From there, God brought people into his life, people who agree he was no typical hospital patient.

Tom, 48, met the hospital's oncology staff chaplain, Sister Sue Tracy, O.P. The two initially engaged in conversation since both are die-hard Pistons fans.

But the discussion had a more focused purpose when Tom told her of his assignment.

"I don't know all the details, but I will learn as I go," he told her.

The Roman Catholic nun, herself a survivor of four bouts of cancer, (breast and skin cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma) concluded God had a purpose for their meeting. Sister Tracy, a motivational speaker to cancer victims, recalls telling him, "Tom, this is a gift to the wider world." She asked Tom if she could share his "special assignment" testimony with her audience of cancer victims in Cincinnati later that day. To Sister Tracy's amazement, many in the audience came forward after the meeting to share a similar word of how God had spoken to them about a special assignment in their lives.

The true blessing for Tom, according to Sister Tracy, is that he "... sees this as part of a spiritual journey, not just a physical crisis or emotional devastation but truly a spiritual opportunity to go forward toward union with God."

Tom says Sister Tracy provided him with biblical insights he needed to hear: Cancer is the little c and Christ is the big C.



CANCER IS THE LITTLE C... CHRIST IS THE BIG C.

— SISTER TRACY

MOST REMARKABLE

Dr. Rick Switzer served as Tom's medical consultant to Butterworth's oncologist, Dr. Alan Campbell. Dr. Switzer has witnessed first-hand how devastated and fearful some people become when they learn they have cancer.

Tom was different.

"From the beginning he had a peace about this that comes from the Lord," says Dr. Switzer. "He really did seem to be on assignment there. The nurses wanted to go in and see him and resident doctors wanted to talk to him. He really touched a lot of people's lives."

An added blessing: common side effects chemotherapy can cause such as sores in the mouth and vomiting didn't happen to Tom. He was fatigued and did get a spike in temperature from an infection but the infection was treated with antibiotics. These are common and treatable side effects, says Dr. Switzer.

Just as big a blessing: When a bone marrow test was taken, no cancer was detected in Tom's body, atypical for the first eradication round, says Dr. Switzer.

Dr. Switzer confirms Tom's test result was "completely clean."

"I would expect a long-term, cancer-free cure," he says.

HIS PLAN AND PURPOSE

Liz's medical background as a registered nurse for DeVos Children's Hospital's poison control center both "helped and hindered" her, she says, knowing in more detail the realities Tom faced.

On the medical side, Liz learned that not too long ago patients with the type of leukemia Tom had (acute promyelocytic) had an extremely poor prognosis. Through recent medical breakthroughs, the survival rate has increased dramatically.

But Tom's ordeal went further than survival rates and chemotherapy treatments.

Ultimately, "I had to realize God was sovereign and in control and that His perfect will would be done," Liz says.

Tom is grateful for the support and love Liz gave him.

"The 43 days I was there, she never missed a day," says a grateful Tom, father of three children, Tom, 20, Colleen, 18, and Kristin, 16.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

Without a stable, ongoing relationship with Christ, it's understandable when people withdraw into themselves, says Tom. He took it to another level – and introduced people to the One Who gives eternal life.

"It's not about me," he says. "It's about Jesus. I've reached people I never would be able to reach, to share the love of Jesus.

"It made sense why I was there, not only to share the Gospel but also for God to do some things in my heart. That was just huge. No matter what people are going through, they can minister to people.

"People will have opportunities they never had before to reach individuals if they let Jesus shine through them and take advantage of the special assignment in their lives."

SPECIAL THANKS

The Gallant family would like to thank everyone who has not only stood with them in prayer, but also with acts of kindness. Special thanks to Dr. Switzer, Dr. Alan Campbell, and the staff at Butterworth Hospital, 5 South.

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