Bob Griffith | EVERYDAY HEROES

A survivor’s instinct

A reserve officer with the La Palma Police Department was, medically speaking, a lost cause. Now he comforts new melanoma patients.

Against all odds, he made it. Griffith, a youthful-looking 67-year-old dressed in a crisp blue shirt and tan slacks, is bellowing on his own terms.

Every Wednesday, he serves as a kind of opening act to Jakowatz, a surgeon who is recognized as an international authority on melanoma and skin cancer.

Some patients think Griffith is the doctor when he walks into the exam room. What he dispenses, though, is peace of mind, from someone who’s been there.

GREG PROWNO

Griffith, of North Tustin, had the worst of it: stage IV melanoma. Back then, the five-year-survival rate was virtually nonexistent.

He was 35 when first diagnosed with stage II melanoma before learning, in 2010, that cancer had spread from his head to his lymph nodes and then to his intestines, liver and kidneys. Griffith, a reserve cop for the La Palma Police Department, was told to call it in order.

That’s when he met James Jakowatz, M.D., for treatment.

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One long, dark-haired woman has just entered the exam room, devastated.

Griffith walks into another exam room where Candy Howe, 61, of Mission Viejo is waiting to see Dr. Jakowatz for a non-invasive growth behind her right shoulder.

“With what you have, Griffith tells her, “you’re at the best possible place.”

Dr. Jakowatz says he believes the multi-agency North County Cancer Support Foundation (NCSCF), which he co-founded eight years ago, is one of the best in the country.

The NCSCF holds local people’s trust. When someone is on a waiting list, they will wait; when someone is told there’s nowhere else to go, he fills the void. Griffith is no different.

He’s done a great job for us. There is life after melanoma. People have to see that there’s some kind of hope. Don’t give up. Keep pursuing treatments. Keep pursuing different therapies.”

Bob Griffith

Age: 67
Home: North Tustin
Family: Wife, Linda, a 66-year-old, 20-year-old daughter, and her 19-year-old son
Pioneer charity: National Law Enforcement Cancer Support Foundation (NCSCF), which he co-founded eight years ago, with another (after 5 p’s)
Sunscreen: Neutrogena SPF 55

Griffith, left, shares a laugh with Bryan Bond, who was visiting Dr. James Jakowatz for an evaluation on what he called an atypical mole. They’re the latest two in a UC Medical Center meeting with new melanoma patients to help ease their fears.

Bob Bond says of Griffith, "This guy was on death’s doorstep. And he came back strong. That’s what I want to do."

Griffith explains his volunteerism this way: "When you’re supposed to be dead and you’re not, you’ve got to share that hope.

So he does. One of the patients Griffith sees this Wednesday is a super fit, 33-year-old man who just found a cancerous lesion on his arm.

Griffith endured extensive chemotherapy treatments and participated in clinical trials.

Against all odds, he made it. What’s he going to share with others? To be successful, you’ve got to find meaning in that. You ask yourself, ‘What’s my gift? What’s my role?’

‘This job scares the (heck) out of me sometimes,’ he says of his role.

He cites a favorite quote from Albert Einstein: “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

Griffith becomes close to many of his patients. He’s attended many funerals, including his mother’s.

Another patient with a much-less serious diagnosis is here for an exam room. Bryan Bendl, a 33-year-old mortgage banker, has an atypical mole on a shoulder.

“Very comforting to see someone who’s been to hell and back,” Bond says of Griffith.

The remainder of the Wednesday meeting continues.

What he dispenses, though, is peace of mind, from someone who’s been there.

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