2014

News in Brief

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In June 2008, John Kessler was just shy of his 56th birthday – and had been experiencing several days of severe pain from a familiar source: kidney stones. He remembers that it was Friday the 15th when he and his wife, Mary, made the decision to drive from their home in Blackwood, New Jersey, to the Emergency Room at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.

He says that by the time he had a CT scan, the stones seemed to have become lodged, reducing the intensity of his pain. But he and wife soon received shocking news: the scan showed that John had stage IV pancreatic cancer.

That diagnosis started a journey at Jefferson that has lasted six years – and counting. His experience with personal medical matters or to substitute for consultation with a physician.

Despite the many challenges he has faced, John remains upbeat, optimistic and very grateful for the care he continues to receive at Jefferson. In fact, in June of this year, he sent a handwritten letter and generous gift to the Department of Surgery to recognize the individuals who have helped him along the way. The gift was split between the Pancreatic Research Fund and Thoracic Surgery Research & Education Fund.

"Everyone I have encountered, from the intake person in the emergency room to the people who would ask if it was a convenient time to clean my room, have been truly exceptional. I believe the attitude at Jefferson is as healing as the medicine."

The Kesslers’ gift is supporting clinical research in lung and esophageal cancer," explains Dr. Evans, Director of the Minimally Invasive Thoracic Surgery Program. "Ongoing research in our program is exploring the impact of minimally invasive techniques on patient outcomes and identifying risk factors for recurrence in early stage patients. Grateful patient support like theirs is crucial to getting these types of projects off the ground."

"The care at Jeff, to me, is just extraordinary, and I believe in commending a job well done," says John, who has been married to Mary for 52 years and has two grown daughters. "The doctors have been very matter of fact and direct in giving us the best way to go, but at the same time, they’re very courteous and respectful. We experienced that with everyone we met at Jefferson."

For information about making a contribution to the Department of Surgery, please contact Lara Goldstein in the Jefferson Office of Institutional Advancement at 215-355-8797 or lara.goldstein@jefferson.edu.