Celebrating Life

His father's death and a cancer diagnosis within moments of each other put Bert Holbrook to one of life's ultimate tests, but with his wife Yvonne's help, he is fighting back and embracing each day.

Bert Holbrook and his wife Yvonne live just 10 minutes from Eisenhower Medical Center. The 70-year-olds both enjoyed a very healthy life, played golf and tennis, and rarely had the need for a hospital visit. Then last July, things changed. "I was mentioning to Yvonne just the other day, I wonder how many people in the Coachella Valley realize what a great health care facility they have here. Living so close, we didn't think anything about it. Now, when I drive by, it is almost like I want to say thank you."

Kentucky natives Bert and Yvonne first came to Palm Springs in 1983 when Bert, then an optometrist, was attending a business conference in San Francisco. Many rainy days there sent them searching for sunshine. Bert suggested a quick flight to the desert. A reluctant Yvonne agreed. They spent three days in Palm Springs and were hooked. So enamored were they with the area, a few years later the Holbrooks purchased a condominium in the area so they could spend more time enjoying the Palm Springs lifestyle.

Bert and Yvonne went on with life in Kentucky, making frequent jaunts to Palm Springs for rest and relaxation. Bert was extremely busy with six optometric practices and had no immediate plans for retirement. However, in the mid-1990s he was offered a buyout that changed his mind. "It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, and I knew that I should accept their offer. I ran the practices for two years from Palm Springs until I officially retired in 1997." Bert and Yvonne became full-time desert dwellers in Rancho Mirage.

A few years of peaceful desert living would be dramatically altered by loss and health concerns. Soon after the death of Bert's mother, his father's health began failing. "I started having to fly back to Kentucky fairly often to check on my dad. The strange thing was, I had scheduled a colonoscopy three different times at Eisenhower Medical Center and almost every time the appointment came up, word would come from home that dad was ill, and I'd have to fly back." Dutifully, Bert once again went home to make sure his father was okay, neglecting his own health in the process. "I knew something wasn't quite right, and when it happened the fourth time, I told Yvonne we just need to schedule the test in Kentucky. I couldn't put it off any longer."

Bert went in for his colonoscopy procedure under sedation.When he woke up, Yvonne came in and informed Bert that his father had just passed away. Within 30 minutes, the physician delivered the results of Bert's test. They were positive. He had rectal cancer and the tumor was large. "I'll never forget that time — the shock of dad and the cancer. I was really at a loss."

Once back home, Bert consulted a friend whose wife had battled cancer for a recommendation of a physician. He recommended Eisenhower's Douglas Jodoin, MD. "Dr. Jodoin started everything going. He set up all the appointments that I needed with my surgeon, oncologist, and a radiation oncologist. Having been through so much already, it was such a relief to have all this organized for us. It took so much stress off of us." "The blessings I feel that Yvonne and I have had in our lives have become so much more vivid."

Dr. Jodoin assembled the Eisenhower Medical Center team of Michael Last, MD, Luke Dreisbach, MD and Monica Khanna, MD. A pleasant surprise for Bert was that Dr. Last, Section Chief of General Surgery for Eisenhower Medical Center, thought the surgery could be done laparoscopically, avoiding an open surgical procedure and speeding his recovery time, and he could have a muscle-saving operation to preserve intestinal functions — options unavailable to Bert in Kentucky. There he had been told the procedure would include major abdominal surgery with a large incision, which entails longer recovery time, and a colostomy [a surgical opening from the colon to the abdominal wall] for the rest of his life. A shorter hospital stay and an ability to return to normal activities within a few weeks offered Bert some good news in the midst of an emotionally and physically exhausting time. "Bert's tumor was in the mid portion of the rectum, the last six inches of the gastrointestinal tract," says Michael Last, MD. "There isn't a lot of room to operate in that area and in men, the pelvis is smaller, which makes the surgery even more difficult. But I felt confident we could perform the operation without a permanent surgical opening."

The surgery removed the left colon and all but two inches of Bert's rectum, and for six weeks after surgery, he lived with an ileostomy, an opening from the the ileum (a part of the small intestine) to the abdominal wall. "That introduced me to a different world, and needless to say, I am grateful that at this point I will not need to go that route," says Bert. "However, in that time I read a lot of information provided to me by Eisenhower Medical Center about people who go through life with ileostomies and colostomies and how they enjoy a full and productive life. That was one good thing that came out of that experience. So I thought if it did come down to it, I could live a good life either way."

Following surgery, Bert began the slow and difficult process of trying to regulate his bowels to some state of normalcy. "It was a challenge. Dr. Last said it would be three to six months before I would know the outcome and told me to be patient and give it time. I've done that, and Dr. Last was correct. I'm so much better now than I was only a month ago. I'll never be able to thank Dr. Last enough."

Bert recently completed his final 12-week round of chemotherapy. He remembers a time not long ago, when his doctors told him to take one day at a time, and get the best out of each day. Bert's gratitude for life takes him outside to the desert vistas he calls home. "I love gardening," Bert reflects. "I'd rather dig in the dirt these days. I love the flowers and seeing things grow….I'm just so thankful to be at this stage. I can only tell you how much more appreciative I am of what I see each day. The blessings I feel that Yvonne and I have had in our lives have become so much more vivid.We have been married for 50 years, and her support through this has meant so much to me. Eisenhower is an incredible facility with state-of-the-art treatment. Yvonne and I are so grateful to everyone at Eisenhower for their guidance through this journey. To each of them, we say thank you and God bless you from the bottom of our hearts. To be at this point, compared to last July where there was a feeling that you might be going through each day or month for the last time, it's humbling to say the least. It has affected me in so many ways."

Photos by Andreas Koessler

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