

Cancer charity gives Bryn Mawr family a respite vacation

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DAN SCHULTZ

By Eddie Levin

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In today's hustle and bustle, it is not uncommon to sometimes disregard one's health in order to complete a task.

When Bryn Mawr resident Dan Schultz, 36, felt some discomfort in his lower abdomen he did not think too much about it. However, when the pain did not subside Schultz decided it was time to see his doctor.

"He was not sure what the problem was," Schultz said in a recent interview. "A persistent, dull discomfort is hard to diagnose, but we took it seriously. Over the course of a few visits, we talked about it, palpated it and eventually ran a CT. We agreed to monitor the issue, and I'd let him know if anything changed."

About a month after having the CT, Schultz noticed a swelling of the lymph nodes in his lower abdomen/pelvic area. After notifying his doctor, he was immediately sent for further tests including an MRI.

The doctor called Schultz with the MRI results. It appeared there was a tumor in Schultz's thigh. Over the next six weeks, further tests would conclude it was an aggressive sarcoma, a rare form of cancer. Further, it was "late stage" and had spread from his thigh to both femurs, several vertebrae, the lungs, the ribs and the pelvic lymph nodes.

"It was definitely a shock," said Schultz. "All of sudden everything is put into perspective and you have to readjust your priorities."

After coming to grips with the situation, Schultz sat down with his oncologist to decide on treatment.

"I was clear that I wanted to be as aggressive as possible," he said. That would mean starting with a clinical trial for sarcoma offered at the Mayo Clinic. From September through December, Schultz and his wife traveled this 2,000-mile round trip almost weekly for treatment. Then in January 2011, his Penn doctors placed him on intense cycles of IV chemotherapy or hydration every eight out of 21 days.

When Schultz arrived for one of his treatments at Penn, he mentioned an organization, "For Pete's Sake," to his oncology nurse, Denise Smith. Friends and co-workers of Schultz and his wife had approached him about this great organization. He mentioned that the program helps families of cancer patients take an all-expenses-paid vacation at a much-needed time.

In order to qualify, one must be nominated by his/her oncology nurse and it turned out that Smith was familiar with the program. At first Schultz felt grateful for the outpouring of support he had already received and did not feel like he would be a good candidate.

After careful thinking Smith thought Schultz was the perfect candidate and nominated him for a trip to Orlando that would include round-trip transportation provided by Southwest Airlines; a rental property sponsored by All-Star



Thanks to the organization For Pete's Sake, cancer patient Dan Schultz was able to spend quality time with his family: a trip to Disney World.

Vacations; tickets to all the parks including Disney World, Universal and Sea World sponsored by Disney; and spending money provided by the foundation.

"He (Schultz) did not feel he deserved it," said Smith. "Dan is like an ambassador. He talks to everyone and he tries to cheer other people up. He is a quality person who I thought could definitely use some time away with his family."

Smith pointed out to Schultz that the trip has less to do with his feelings about the goodwill he's received and more to do with his kids – triplet 5-year-olds and an 8-year-old – who are going through this too, from the crazy trial schedule to now seeing Dad connected to an IV at home. They also need a break from cancer. They want to see their dad feeling good and being fun. The family needed time to regroup.

"When I heard Dan's story, I felt he was the perfect candidate," said Marci Schankweiler, who is the founder of For Pete's Sake. "With everything he was going through, I felt he could really benefit from some time away."

Shortly after being nominated, Schultz found out that he was going to be able to take his wife and three kids away on a very memorable trip.

"The trip was critical," Schultz said, "and so well organized. For Pete's Sake truly thought of everything that goes into the trip, from start to finish. This is important to me and to families struggling with cancer. Cancer is a logistical nightmare. My wife has been the glue holding our family together, playing the role of single parent and personal nurse. FPS honestly provided a ready-made experience of a lifetime, something she didn't have to plan at all."

Schultz recalled the trip. "It was something that was needed for the family. It was the perfect time for us to get away and put everything behind us even for a short time. The kids smiled and laughed, and we shared great dinners together. For a week the kids didn't worry about Dad... they just played like kids. We are so thankful for FPS, and all the donors that provided the airfare, home, tickets and more."

For Pete's Sake (www.takeabreakfromcancer.org), which was named after the late Pete Bossow, was founded a little over 10 years ago and enables cancer patients and their loved ones to strengthen, deepen and unify their relationships by giving them unforgettable and lasting respite vacations.

The organization's founder, Marci Schankweiler, said, "Because of the change of life families experience, we want to give them the opportunity to benefit from having some quality family time away."

The organization sends 85 families away during the course of the year and it hopes to be able to expand their generosity and send 120-130 families away.

In order for everything to come together, organizations like For Pete's Sake could not exist without the help of corporate sponsors.

In addition to All-Star Vacations, Southwest Airlines and Disney, sponsors who have made vital contributions have been Brandywine Realty and Spectrum Furniture.

"Our sponsors have been very important," said Schankweiler. "We would not be able to do this without their help."

While continued research to help find a cure for cancer continues, it is nice to know that there are organizations to help give people a respite, even for a short time.