

Man with a Plan

BY MARK SCHWANINGER, ONE MAGAZINE

Known for putting clients at ease with his calm demeanor while explaining their estate plans, Carlson prefers to wear an eye patch at the law firm. PHOTO BY GEOFF JOHNSON, MALONE AND COMPANY

Darren Carlson resumes his active lifestyle after tough bout with cancer

Darren Carlson, 47, a founding partner of the Carlson-Burnett law firm in Omaha, isn't about to let cancer get in the way of his busy life.

He faced a roadblock when doctors had to perform multiple surgeries to remove his right eye and socket, cheekbone, the roof of his mouth and the upper right part of his teeth and gums to stop an aggressive cancer in his sinus cavity. But his bigger-than-life sense of humor and perseverance, combined with medical technology and support from family and friends, have allowed him to beat cancer and resume his active lifestyle.

"This July 1st, it will be three years since I finished radiation therapy," he says. "I go in for follow-up X-rays and alternating MRI and CT scans every six months, and that will continue two more years. So far, everything is clear."

"Having a cancer cell grow someday is a real possibility, but the doctors don't provide statistics. I'm not living in fear, and I'm enjoying every day that I have."

Carlson is thankful that medical technology saved his life and made resuming his active lifestyle possible. He has returned to volunteering in the Omaha community. He is president of the Millard Educational Foundation's Board of Directors and secretary of the Omaha Home for Boys Board of Directors.

This past April he and his wife, Tammy, chaired the artVenture Girl Scouts fundraiser in the Scouler Ballroom.

Among many other volunteer activities, Carlson is a past president of Tangier Shrine Clowns and enjoys performing as a clown for charity events. Since losing his eye, he changed his character's name from "Zipper the Clown" to "Dar; the Eye-Patched Pirate."

Carlson now has a prosthetic eye, but he only wears it while running, swimming or doing P90X workouts six days a week with Tammy.

Known for putting clients at ease with his calm demeanor while explaining their estate plans, Carlson prefers to wear an eye patch at work.

"I'm real sensitive to meeting new people with a deformity that hits them in the nose," he says. "I tell clients up front what happened – that I'm a cancer survivor, and that's why I look like this and have a patch."

Symptoms started as a plugged nasal passage

Undergoing multiple surgeries – each one removing another part of his face – was clearly not easy.

A fitness enthusiast who has competed in two triathlons, Carlson's symptoms began as a plugged right nasal passage that made it difficult to breathe properly while running. Dr. James Huerter, an ear, nose and throat specialist, diagnosed the condition as a common fungus and scraped it out during an outpatient procedure.

"Cancer was never discussed or even suspected at the time," Carlson recalls.

When the symptoms returned two weeks later, the procedure was repeated. Three weeks after that everything appeared fine, so Carlson and his family headed to Palm Springs, Calif., for the Christmas break.

The next day he awoke to the familiar pressure in his sinus. "I thought, 'It's back and growing,'" he says. "That's when the

problems really started.

"I discovered that between Christmas and New Year's, you can die in Palm Springs before you find a doctor who isn't on vacation."

After finding a doctor, he was referred to Loma Linda University Medical Center, where Dr. Christopher Church performed the same procedure that Dr. Huerter had performed in Omaha, only this time using MRI-guided lasers.

"They said they got it all out, but they didn't know what it was and they would test it in pathology," Carlson recalls.

Ten days later he was back at his Omaha law firm, jogging in



Carlson visits with client Scott Hazelrigg at the Carlson-Burnett law firm. PHOTO BY GEOFF JOHNSON, MALONE AND COMPANY

his spare time and feeling fine – until Dr. Church left a voice mail message.

"I knew right away when a doctor really wants to talk to you and gives you his cell phone number, there's a problem," Carlson says.

Dr. Church told Carlson he had a leiomyosarcoma, adding, "If you could pick any cancer, this would not be it."

Aggressive form of cancer

Dr. Alan Richards, head and neck surgeon, ordered his own pathology testing at Nebraska Medical Center and said it was actually a spindle cell sarcoma. Carlson did his Internet research, and either way it was a rare, aggressive form of cancer with no cure.

"I'm lucky that it was in the sinus cavity by the eye socket, which is 99 percent bone," Carlson says. "That bone structure probably confined it and kept it from spreading to my brain."

Dr. Richards – a client of Carlson's – was the lead physician in five surgeries.

"He told me the only way to beat this kind of cancer is to cut it out," Carlson recalls. "I've got half the upper right side of my teeth and my palate gone, which were replaced with false teeth and a false palate. They're locked in place with magnets – so the teeth and prosthetic eye are magnetized together."

"When I take out the false teeth, the whole piece pops out. You could easily fit a golf ball in the opening – almost a tennis ball."

Doctors tried to rebuild Carlson's cheekbone by first removing a thigh muscle and attaching its blood supply to the cheek. When ultrasound indicated insufficient blood flow three days later, they attempted the procedure again using a thigh muscle from his other leg.

"As a runner and biker, in hindsight I wouldn't let them take my thigh muscles," Carlson says. "The upper thighs are their first two choices, and the abdomen is their third choice. When it didn't work the second time, the doctors decided there wasn't enough blood supply up there. The concave cheek on my right side just is what it is."

Doctors were amazed at Carlson's positive attitude throughout his surgeries and treatments. Far from hiding at home as the doctors say some patients would do, he often showed up for doctor appointments in exercise clothes after a workout.

Sense of humor helped him cope

Throughout the ordeal, Carlson kept his sense of humor. He posted blogs that joked about his illness on a Web site called CarePages for ill and injured people. From writing about conspiring with a CT scan technician to frighten medical students by feigning an allergic reaction to dye, to answering children who asked if he was a pirate in a doctor's waiting room, Carlson's sense of humor prevailed.

After the surgeries, Carlson completed follow-up radiation therapy for seven weeks to kill any cancer cells that might remain. A side effect resulted from fallout that hit his tongue.

"It totally messed up my taste buds, so I just flat out couldn't force myself to eat," Carlson recalls. "But I could live on what amounted to a huge chocolate malt with a protein supplement – about 2,000 calories – during that period."

"One guy told me when water tastes bad, that's when you've hit rock bottom."

Today, Carlson says his biggest daily inconvenience is a lack of depth perception from two to four feet due to only having one eye.

"A few weeks ago I dumped a malt on the table," he says. "I totally missed the cup."

Throughout Carlson's diagnosis and medical treatments, his family's support amazed him. Wife Tammy, director of corporate benefits and safety at Lozier Corp., "was around 100 percent of the time when things needed to be done for my health," he says.

Teenage son Alex ground up pills for his father and helped force thick liquids through his feeding tube. Young daughter Hannah helped with household chores.

Carlson, who grew up on a farm in central Iowa, earned his undergraduate degree in agricultural business at Iowa State University. He graduated magna cum laude from Creighton University Law School and has practiced law for 22 years. He started his law firm with longtime colleague Anne Burnett in April 2008. In the past few months, the firm added two partners and now has six attorneys.

He has many reasons to be optimistic about life again. When asked if he is a positive person in general, Carlson replied, "I think I'm a realist. But friends say I'm an optimist."