



Cancer that ravaged Darren Carlson's face never stood a chance against his zest for life

Humor is his lifeline

By RICK RUGGLES
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Cancer wormed its way into Darren Carlson's face, taking his right eye, the roof of his mouth and his right cheekbone.

It couldn't destroy his sense of humor.

In the middle of his battle with a rare, aggressive form of cancer last year, Carlson taped Frankenstein-like bolts to his head. He suggested calling a high school fundraiser the "Darren Carlson Thank God It's Not a Memorial Golf Tournament."

And when it became clear that he'd lose his eye, he changed his Shrine clown name from Zipper to Darr, the eye-patched pirate.

Each new surgery removed more of Carlson's face. But he found reasons to be relieved with — and joke about — what remained.

The 45-year-old Omahan has refused to hide, returning to work as an estate-planning attorney within three weeks of one of his toughest surgeries and sharing details of his illness on his joke-filled Web site. The cancer is gone. He figures he has a 50-50 shot at keeping it that way.

"At this stage, I won, and I won big," he said.

Carlson's resilience astonishes surgeons.

"If that were me, you know, it would be incredibly devastating," said Dr. Jason Miller, a plastic surgeon who operated on Carlson. "You like to think you'd respond like he did. I think he's the exception rather than the rule."

Carlson had many reasons to be optimistic two years ago. His family took a Mediterranean cruise in the summer of 2006, and co-owned a condo in Palm Springs, Calif.

He had two great kids. His wife, Tammy, had a high-level job at Lozier Corp. and enjoyed Iowa State University sports as much as he did. His law practice flourished.

Then his medical ordeal began.

It started with congestion and nosebleeds, diagnosed as a fungus in October 2006 and taken care of with minor surgery a month later. Problem solved.

A couple of weeks after that, the congestion returned, with more intense bleeding. Surgeons removed the fungus, and Carlson felt relieved a biopsy uncovered no cancer.

But by the time the Carlsons flew to Palm Springs for Christmas 2006, his nose was plugged again, and he felt pressure and pain in his head. Blood poured from his nose and his right eye was swollen shut.

At their favorite restaurant, he spent most of the time in the bathroom, pushing toilet paper up his nose to stop the bleeding.

We are in trouble, his wife thought.

A Palm Springs-area doctor referred Carlson to a hospital, where Dr. Christopher Church performed surgery a few days after the new year, on Jan. 3. Carlson went home, felt well and resumed work.

A week later, he got an alarming voice-mail message from Church. Carlson knew enough about physicians to realize that when the doctor wants to talk instead of a nurse or assistant, the news generally is bad.

The doctor told Carlson he had an aggressive sarcoma, called leiomyosarcoma, in the sinus cavity. If you were to choose your cancer, you would not choose this one, the doctor told him.

Carlson did not ask if he would

die. But he came away feeling it was a real possibility.

By evening, Carlson had made an appointment with Dr. Alan Richards, a head and neck surgeon and cancer specialist at the Nebraska Medical Center. Richards was one of Carlson's estate-planning clients.

That night, after the children had gone to their rooms, Carlson cried in front of his wife. He was scared. Carlson thought: How would the kids deal with it if he didn't survive?

His wife had broken down after her husband called with the diagnosis, but she was stern with him that evening.

She remembers telling him: We're a team. We'll fight it as a team. And they didn't even know the prognosis.

It horrified his wife to see him this way — he was such a positive guy. He always had a game plan, never seemed overwhelmed, never needed to be told to get tough.

His late father, Dorn Carlson, had marveled at his son's optimism. If the boy received a shoebox full of manure at Christmas, his dad had said, Darren would run out in search of the pony.

Darren was a sophomore prac-

Surgeons took numerous biopsies of the sinus and removed some of the cancer on Jan. 29. Ultimately, Nebraska Medical Center experts diagnosed the cancer as spindle cell sarcoma. Although Carlson eventually would learn there was little difference and the treatment was the same, he was glad it was not leiomyosarcoma, because he perceived it as more deadly.

Eight days later, they removed the roof of his mouth and a quarter of his teeth.

Carlson posted information about his illness on a Web site called CarePages for sick and injured people.

On the site, he reported that he and a technician had conspired to terrify medical students watching him get a CT scan. He pretended he was allergic to the dye. He shook, flapped his arms, kicked, rolled his eyes, moaned and gagged. "The med students were mortified!" he wrote.

Carlson returned to work for a few hours a day in late February. He hoped he had defeated cancer. Then he began to feel lumps inside his mouth.

Tests confirmed cancer. Richards told Carlson the right eye, the socket around it and the right

but that effort ultimately failed and the muscle had to be removed.

Tammy Carlson wrote on the CarePages that her husband had been to hell and back. "He is the strongest person I know to go through all of this, maintain a very positive attitude and combat all the pain."

Of course, it was awful to lose an eye. But to her husband, it was not important at that point. All of the cancer had been cut out.

Carlson went home with a feeding tube in his nose and the eye hole packed with gauze that secured a skin graft covering exposed bone. By April 3, he had endured six surgeries over 91 days.

His wife was the first to see the eyehole during a follow-up visit to Miller, the plastic surgeon. A bandage covered the hole, still packed with gauze.

Miller briefly showed her the hole as he examined the area. Its size and depth jolted her.

After the appointment, her husband asked what it looked like: "Is there just a big hole in there?"

Carlson finally saw the hole several days later. He knew he would need an eye patch until he got a prosthetic eye.

Specialists fitted Carlson with an artificial palate and teeth. When he removes them, he can put his index finger through his mouth, into the cavern on the right side of his face, and out the eye hole. One night last fall, he did that for visitors and said that if he put a light in there, it would make an interesting sight on Halloween.

"I told you I'm a real pirate," he said, leaning down toward daughter Hannah, who laughed.

After the surgeries, Carlson underwent more than seven weeks of radiation to kill any cancer cells that the surgery might not have removed.

"One gentleman in his seventh week of radiation explained to me that you know the taste won't deteriorate any further when you can't stand the taste of water," Carlson wrote in early May. "Wow, something else to look forward to."

He returned to work in April and resumed walking and lifting light weights. Exercise was important. He had dropped some 40 pounds seven years before and had competed in two triathlons.

Carlson, wearing a warm-up outfit, visited Miller for an appointment after a walk.

Miller had seen people hide in their homes for long periods after far less devastating facial surgery. Carlson's energy, outgoing spirit and resilience amazed him. "He's an incredible guy," Miller said.

cheekbone would have to be removed. A neurosurgeon would be added to the surgical team in case the cancer had entered the brain.

"My right eye looks really bad. The eye is completely swollen shut," Carlson wrote on March 21. "I have no concerns about having the eye removed. The key is — they cannot afford to leave any cancer in me!"

After about 15 hours of surgery on March 23, he awoke, pleased that surgeons had not



Daughter Hannah offers a hug to Darren Carlson as he finishes dinner with wife Tammy. Though Carlson had cried in front of his wife after getting his cancer diagnosis, she knew he always had a game plan, never seemed overwhelmed and never needed to be told to get tough.

had to operate on his brain.

They had attempted to rebuild the concave spot where the cheekbone was removed by packing some thigh muscle inside the cheek. But blood clotting prevented the blood supply from flowing naturally.

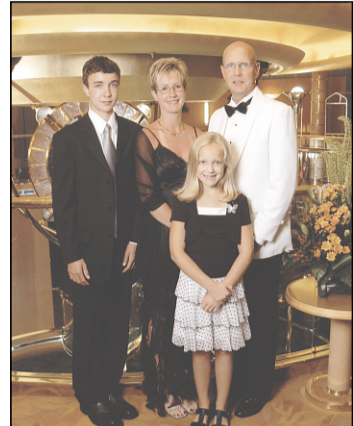
A few days later, doctors again attempted to rebuild the cheek,

Last fall, the Carlsons did what they loved: drove their recreational vehicle to Ames the night before Iowa State home football games, then tailgated on game days. They drank pop and bloody Marys and ate cinnamon rolls.

At one game, Carlson sneaked a cowbell into the stadium by stuffing it in his pants. The four



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"The left is a lot better than the right," Darren Carlson joked, above, in describing his vision to anesthesiologist Tom Dollison before one operation. Carlson lost his right eye to spindle cell sarcoma. At right, Carlson with his family: wife, Tammy; son, Alex; and daughter, Hannah.



in fluoride 30 minutes a night to prevent decay. If he were to lose them, it would be more difficult to attach his artificial palate.

He doubts he'll swim again and thus won't compete in another triathlon. He suspects his head would fill with water.

If he leans forward while drinking, the liquid escapes around the artificial palate and out his nose. To pour wine, he must first touch the bottle to the glass because of impaired depth perception.

He gets cold easily. He ran the five kilometer Race for the Cure in October, but it wiped him out for days. He only recently has felt strong enough to resume running semiregularly. Because his right eye is gone, he shoots trap left-handed.

He changed his notion of having the "Darren Carlson Thank God It's Not a Memorial Golf Tournament." The tournament was for his son's Millard North marching band, and Carlson decided to create a nonprofit organization to benefit the entire high school.

Carlson said he ignores the possibility that the cancer could return. "It may be five years, it may be 10, it may be never," he said. "I'm not living in fear. And I'm enjoying every day I've got."

Keeping his wit

Excerpts of blogs by Darren Carlson, all from 2007. Carlson has kept his sense of humor through his bout with cancer:

Jan. 23rd

I have been assembling all the critical questions that I need to ask my doctors on Thursday. . . . When do they issue me one of those blue parking passes? Do I get to order wine with my meals? Does the hospital recognize my AAA membership discount?

Jan. 26th

Doc confirmed that my modeling career is probably not going to flourish.

Feb. 27th (Carlson anticipating his conversation with a physician)

I feel like my whatchamacallit is doing much better. I'm not sure how it got all out of whack and discombobulated in the first place!! It's a good thing that you doctors have that thingamabob to fix my doohickey. By the way Doc, did you ever happen to find that one gadget that we talked about using to remove the thingamabob from the roof of my mouth?

Feb. 27th

When I drink and eat, some of the food/beverage leaks around the prosthetic device and ultimately into the sinus cavity and out my nose. I learn something new every day!! Yesterday I learned that hot salsa is twice as hot in your sinus and nose as it is in your mouth. Wow!

Oct. 3rd

Upon entering the doctors' waiting room, two little children (around 3 and 4 years old) immediately noticed my patch over the eye. The older child immediately exclaimed, "look mom, a pirate!" I couldn't help myself. I had to reply, "Arrre, what makes ya think I'm a pirate! O, yea — the patch always gives us pirates away. Arrrrg!"