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A 'great opportunity' **Principal's fight with cancer opens his eyes**

By Sarah Koenig
Enterprise writer

Most people, when they hear the words "lying in bed for days too sick to get up" don't immediately think: "great opportunity."

But that's what things became this fall for Greg Gelderman, principal of Heatherwood Middle School. Gelderman, 54, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer this summer, underwent surgery and rounds of chemotherapy that kept him bedridden for days. He returned to school only this month.

It all began in July, when a visit to a family doctor turned up an unpleasant surprise.

"It was a 10:40 (a.m.) appointment, by 8 that night I was sent to a urologist. I had a testicle removed that same day," Gelderman said.

He and his wife had water-skiing plans that weekend. He called her and said he didn't think they were going anywhere.

"I asked (the doctor) what if no surgery and he said, 'You die,'" Gelderman said. His wife and children walked in the room at that moment, so he didn't pursue it further.

Gelderman endured rounds of chemotherapy August through October. He'd go to the hospital and stay hooked up to a machine that registered chemotherapy drugs for five hours.

For the first few days, he would read. After that, he became too tired to do anything.

"In many ways it was a blessing. How many times (are there) in life when you can't move?" Gelderman said.

Gelderman has been a building principal for 23 years, working 55 to 60 hours a week, and was an elementary school teacher before then. There hasn't been much time to think, he said.



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW

Heatherwood Middle School principal Greg Gelderman has returned to full-time status at the school, after working part-time while going through chemotherapy to treat his cancer. He discusses what he learned during his time off, and his upcoming retirement at the end of the school year, Monday, March 26, in his office at the school.



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW

Heatherwood Middle School principal Greg Gelderman shows a port that was inserted in his arm, with a connecting tube that led to his heart, which allowed doctors to inject chemotherapy treatments directly into it.

But while sick, he came to several realizations. A book called "Pressure's Off" by Larry Crabb was one that got him thinking.

"(Crabb) said you treat life like: 'If I do A, B happens,' and if B doesn't happen, it's like 'What did I mess up?'" Gelderman said.

When people believe that life is linear, and that they control what happens, that creates pressure to always perform, he said.

"Life doesn't work like that," Gelderman said. "Life isn't fair."

When his daughters were young, Gelderman repeated the maxim "Life isn't fair" so many times that by age three or four he would say, "Life isn't..." and they'd say 'Fair.'"

But inside, he'd always felt life would be fair for him, he said. Being sick made him ask himself: Why should it be fair only for me?

The realization that the illness wasn't his fault, that bad things happen to good people, was very liberating, Gelderman said.

"Once I realized life is not linear or fair, the pressure was off in terms of whether I was going to be cured," he said. "(I felt): My final attitude is not going to be determined by the tests coming back with the cancer gone."

Gelderman also began to rethink his relationship with work.

Despite 60 hour workweeks as a principal, Gelderman had managed to be there for his family, but only by burning the candle at both ends, he said. The job is a high-stress one.

"What I tell aspiring principals is they have to treat (the job) like a marathon, not a sprint," Gelderman said. "I've treated it like a sprint."

He began asking himself how long he wanted to keep up that pace.

"I'm not 35, I'm not even 45 anymore," he said. "God whopped me on the side of the head with a two-by-four and said, 'You have to stop.'"

So Gelderman has decided to retire at the end of the school year. He's accepted a part-time job at Seattle Pacific University working with the teacher training program there.

He finished chemotherapy in October, and a three-month follow up showed he's still cancer free. Testicular cancer has a 95 percent cure rate.

Though the cancer has gone, its effects remain.

"I've told myself if I don't come through this a different person, I've missed the opportunity," Gelderman said. "Hopefully I came through different."