

Finding Fellowship

By Liza Berger

It was clear that this group of men shared a special bond. Gathered in Chicago, Illinois to participate in a photo shoot for the fall issue of Cancer Fighters Thrive™ magazine, the friends—five cancer survivors in their sixties—bantered and laughed as though they'd known each other their entire lives.



Over pizza at the renowned Lou Malnati's Pizzeria restaurant, Don Ringley, of Clinton, North Carolina, Liddell Smith, from Shreveport, Louisiana, Bob Stewart, of North Platte, Nebraska, Frank Zimmer of Bryan, Ohio, and Rex Bureson, of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, shared stories and reconnected. Eventually, after covering topics ranging from Don's military experience to airplanes to their shared interest in weaponry, the conversation turned to the subject that is never far from each of their minds: cancer, and the time they spent together at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® in Zion, Illinois.

A Sense of Connection



Having met each other in the dining room at CTCA, as each struggled to find his own way of coping with his newfound illness, the men quickly formed a bond, recognizing common interests, such as rural roots and a love of football. Soon, their connection had all the hallmarks of family: they looked out for each other's needs; they accepted one another's unique personalities;

and they empathized with each other as they faced the challenges of treatment.

Gary Hackney, a former patient who was treated at CTCA in Tulsa, Oklahoma, met the group in Zion, where he volunteers his time three days a week as a Cancer Fighter Ambassador. Gary would often join the group for meals and spent time visiting when he was at the hospital, easily joining in with the friends. "It was really easy to become

friends with these guys,” he says. “When you’re here you automatically become family with everyone—that’s the way it is.”

The CTCA staff recognizes the profound impact of fostering these relationships and provides many opportunities for outings and fellowship. Trips to the movies and to local museums and attractions, group rides to local shopping, and shared meals away from the treatment center are just some of the outings the treatment center offers.

For the five friends, these “off-campus” outings helped cement the bonds they shared and provided welcome relief from the stress of treatment. “Taking the guys on field trips helped to distract them from their cancer,” Gary says. “When we went to the antique car museum in Volo, Illinois, their eyes lit up—they weren’t thinking of treatment or cancer or the pain they were in. They were in their element and living in the moment.” Rex agrees: “The activities kind of took your mind off everything else. We socialized, and it was great. You didn’t go back to the room and sit there and look at the four walls.”

One of the most memorable trips for the group, according to the men, was to the Bake House Restaurant in Hebron, Illinois—about 45 minutes away from CTCA. The group went on a Tuesday night, when accordion musicians come and play. They went in honor of Bob, a musician, who plays the accordion, fiddle, and harmonica. “We could not get Bob out of there,” Gary says. “He was like a little kid in a candy store.”

Strong friendships like these are common at CTCA, where bonds form quickly between patients and are nurtured by the dedicated staff. For the five friends, there’s no doubt that the bonds they have formed will last a lifetime.

