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Daryl Cole: 706-272-6168

Dashler making spirits bright at Hamilton Medical Center's Peoples Cancer Institute

DALTON, Ga. (December 3, 2024) – John Dashler, retired now, well into his 70s, still carries a hefty dose of the same pull-no-punches energy that helped him grow startups to success stories and execute a turnaround for at least one struggling business.

Recently, the Dalton resident has been spending time at Hamilton Medical Center's Peoples Cancer Institute (PCI), doing a job he wasn't hired to do — sharing his infectious optimism and humor with people around him as they undergo chemotherapy.

"Anything I can do to get them to smile and quit worrying, even if it's just for a little while, it's worth it," he said.

Dashler is also a patient.

He had surgery at Hamilton Medical Center in March to remove three-and-a-half feet of his colon after his digestive system shut down, causing a painful and life-threatening situation that landed him in the emergency room. He said the decision to go through chemo was hard for him, but when his family urged him to do it, he agreed.

Each treatment lasts several hours. Dashler uses the time to make the best of a difficult situation and to lighten the mood — both for himself and for those around him.

"I just like people," Dashler said. "I know why they're here. I'm going through what they're going through."

Recently, seated in Bay 8, he joked with a nurse who joined in on his dry humor as she hung bags of fluid that piped chemo drugs into his body through a port near his collarbone.

"What flavor do you want today?" she deadpanned.

"Cherry."

“Sorry, all we have is lemon-lime.”

They bantered a few more minutes, and eventually she “found” a pumpkin spice variety that met with his approval.

Business background

Dashler was drafted into the Army in 1966, served in Vietnam building telephone communications infrastructure, and stayed in service for 11 years. After getting out, he joined forces with a business partner and became an entrepreneur, learning the leadership qualities that make for success.

Dashler credits leaders at PCI and Hamilton Medical Center with building an entrepreneurial culture that encourages people at every level to take ownership of their part in the business. Dashler said his emergency room experience plus surgery and recovery at Hamilton left him admiring the system.

“You have to have people in positions of responsibility who will take ownership when somebody hits them with a question or a problem,” he said. “They will either take it to someone who can really help them, or they will solve it. And if, in the process of solving it, it takes a couple of days, they provide feedback and updates.”

A place about ‘life and living’

Dashler said he especially enjoys talking with people who are alone, downcast or seem to have given up hope. He tries to offer perspective.

Speaking of cancer, “Everyone thinks they’re going to die from it — and everyone is not,” he said. “I like to sort that out with them.”

He said part of going through chemo is learning what, for some, might be a different way of thinking. His approach is to accept that certain side effects exist and that he will experience them. “I assume the posture of tolerating and managing them,” he said.

Dashler said he approaches fellow patients openly but allows them to guide the conversation. If they want to pray, he’s happy to oblige.

For most of his life, he wasn’t religious, but as he grew older, he felt a tug for something more. With decades of business and personal accomplishments behind him, he and his wife of now 51 years have four children and were enjoying a relatively carefree life, he said, but he felt something was missing.

“The Lord has thumped me a bunch of times, and at 50, I responded,” he said. “I wasn’t content with life, and I kept asking myself, ‘What’s the meaning of life?’”

An avid reader, Dashler found himself immersed in literature that eventually inspired him to join his wife at a local church where he became increasingly involved as a deacon. His goal with fellow patients is encouragement. Even if for only a few minutes, he wants to help them forget the challenging parts of their situations.

“Peoples Cancer Institute is not about death and dying,” he said. “It is about life and living.”

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Photo: John Dashler during an infusion appointment at Peoples Cancer Institute.