



Benton
Hospice
Service

SPRING TONIC: GLENN McELROY

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By Susan Shumway

A hefty dose of Glenn McElroy is all that is needed to turn the grayest day to spring. If you can find him, that is. He could be out cutting down a tree leaning dangerously close to his cabin in the woods or he could be hiking the trail he built across the hillside in Alsea. Despite a terminal diagnosis of rectal cancer, chemotherapy, radiation treatments and a long history with colostomy bags, Glenn is sunshine in a bottle. Any time spent with him is time spent in learning how to live life every minute of the day.

Take his approach to being diagnosed with a terminal illness, for example. “When I found out I was dying, I decided to have a party,” he says. At first, he had a hard time convincing his family that it was a good idea. “Finally, I told them that the party wasn’t for them. It was for me.” Although the party wasn’t until July, he began getting ready in the spring, mowing a big patch of ground where guests could pitch tents and cutting down poles to make a shade area. He even burned music off the internet onto CDs and then timed it, choosing slower music as the day wore on. “It was a great time,” he says with a smile. “I wanted it to be just right.”

And when Glenn makes up his mind to do things right, he does it all the way. Coming from three generations of Oregonians, he started working in the woods as a choker setter and rigging slinger for logging companies. But he is quick to admit that his life also involved a lot of bad habits—drinking and drug use that landed him in jail on occasion. “One day, I said to myself, who is this guy and why is he doing this? I knew what I was doing wasn’t right and so I changed all my bad ways. You know, I get more out of life by not being messed up.”

Taking responsibility for things in his life also meant that when he felt himself slowing down on the job, he switched to driving trucks so he wouldn’t endanger the rest of the logging crew. In 2001, he was diagnosed with cancer and had a colostomy but he kept driving the truck for three years. “It wasn’t easy,” he admits. “I’d have to stop by the side of the road to clean myself up. Sometimes I’d get stuck in traffic and then there was real mess to deal with.” Even then, there is not a trace of self pity in his stories. “When other drivers would see me parked by the side of the road and ask me if I was having trouble” he laughs, “I would tell them I’d be happy to share my trouble with them if they wanted to stop. They weren’t too enthusiastic about the idea!”

Later, during radiation treatments in Washington State, he would hop on his motorcycle and bike fifty-five miles to appointments. “The staff just didn’t know what to make of me, dressed in all my leathers and driving in like that. Most of the people there were in their pajamas!”

When Glenn and his wife, Linda returned to Oregon, they moved into a little cabin in Alsea. In 2006 the rectal cancer returned. This time he was told he had less than eight months to live without treatment. “Dr. Fu told me that aggressive chemo might give me two more years. Now I had sworn I would never have chemo again but then I started thinking. I have nothing materialistic but I’m living in a beautiful place. I don’t have much depression anymore. For the first time since my colostomy, I had gotten to the point where I could live with it. And I needed to do some things to take care of Linda before I died so I told him to do the chemotherapy—to be real aggressive about it.”

In the spring of 2007, Glenn entered hospice care. He says he sympathizes with his hospice nurse, Betsy Boren. “I can be pretty ornery,” he admits. “But Betsy is a sweetheart. I get really good care from her.”

Glenn talks easily about having a terminal illness but is quick to say that he concentrates on living. “I don’t even watch sad TV shows,” he says, “and I stay as active as I can.” After cutting one hiking trail that became too strenuous as his illness advanced, he simply cut an easier one.

You can’t be in Glenn’s presence without being inspired. Even with his illness, he is a fountain of energy and good spirits. Throughout his life, he has taken difficult situations, accepted them and adapted his lifestyle to accommodate or change them. An afternoon spent with him is filled with laughter and good stories. “I don’t think about dying anymore,” he comments, almost in passing. “I did a little bit, right before Christmas, but not anymore. I just think about all the beautiful people that I’ve met. They don’t have money. They’re just like me—what you see is what you get.”

And what you get with Glenn is a man who happily jumps up to the top of a tree stump to have his picture taken; a guy who loves his wife, the old growth fir trees on his hiking trails, and the dog that shares his hearth. What you get is a guy who can play the harmonica like Bob Dylan, maybe even better. What you get is someone who loves life and knows how to live it.

He steps out the door and looks over the fields that surround his home, the shed that he built to hold his woodpile and his tools, and the birdhouses he made that adorn the fences. “I’m a happy man,” he sighs contently. “Yep, I’m a happy man.”

--Susan Shumway, BHS volunteer