

Not Your Average Joe



Joe Dill and grandson, Adonis

Why making a difference in the lives of others means the most to stem-cell transplant survivor, Joe Dill.

On his 65th birthday this past January, Joe Dill sat and happily listened to the “Happy Birthday” serenades from his two sisters, three sons, daughter, and five grandchildren. “I couldn’t help but feel so fortunate to be alive and healthy.” Having his loved ones there to celebrate another year of life made Joe feel like the luckiest, richest man in the world.

Yet, Joe’s life was never one of luxury and ease. He describes his youth and adulthood as being a collection of “lean times” that instilled in him the value of family, friends, and community. This focus on the importance of others made Joe recognize the value of helping those around him. Donating his time, money, and craftsman skills to local nonprofit and charitable programs, Joe found a sense of purpose that afforded him a rich and fulfilled life both during and after his retirement. Yet when he was diagnosed at 59 years of age with scleroderma, Joe couldn’t imagine his days of goodwill were suddenly over. Instead, Joe found

even more ways to give of himself to those around him. He found a way to battle his disease, and in so doing, continues to make the world around him a better place.

Diagnosed and Determined

“I had never heard of a rheumatologist before,” noted Joe, “But nevertheless I made an appointment to go see one.” Up until the morning of March 3, 2003, Joe had spent the past year visiting his family doctor in search of answers regarding his painful and mysterious symptoms: the swelling of his hands, the pain in his knees, the chronic fatigue, and paralyzing hand cramps. His symptoms were deemed purely “psychological” at the time, and as such, were treated with anti-depressant medications for months without resolve. As a man who always took pride in his abilities to work with his hands, Joe felt trapped by his symptoms. He hoped that the rheumatologist would offer him answers to why his symptoms were still unresolved.

As soon as rheumatologist, Dr. Rezaian, entered the room, Joe recalls, “He took one look at me and knew exactly what I had.” Further testing confirmed that Joe did, in fact, have scleroderma. Yet the news came as both a relief and a challenge—for although Joe finally received his diagnosis, his diagnosis was without a cure. Dr. Rezaian recommended that Joe contact Dr. Thomas Medsger in Pittsburgh, Penn., regarding a scleroderma stem-cell transplant study. “They were looking for test subjects,” recalls Joe. “I realized then that if I were to apply as a test-subject, I would have to do it without the expectation that I would be cured. I committed myself to the study not for my own sake, but for the sake of those who came after me.”

VOLUNTEERISM & YOU

According to the Corporation for National Community Service, the latest national statistics reveal 60.8 million volunteers dedicated 8.1 billion hours of service to community organizations nationwide in 2007. Why are so many individuals offering their time and talents to organizations like the Scleroderma Foundation? It's because so many feel volunteerism is a rewarding practice for all parties involved.



Joe Dill is one example of the happiness that can be achieved through the simple act of caring for others. No matter how young or old, everyone can participate in making a difference for members of the scleroderma community.

Below are five simple steps you can use to find out how you can donate a portion of your time and talents to a local Scleroderma Foundation chapter or support group in your area.

1. Contact your local chapter or support group to offer your assistance for an upcoming event. Offering to help out is a great first step to learning more about other volunteer opportunities.
2. Contact your local chapter and ask about the latest Advocacy news and initiatives, and how you can play a role in gaining political support for scleroderma.
3. Get your family and friends involved and host a fundraiser for the Scleroderma Foundation.
4. Attend a support group meeting and learn more about those living with scleroderma.
5. Use the special skills or talents you have to generate awareness for your local chapter or support group.

For more information about volunteering for the Scleroderma Foundation, visit www.scleroderma.org/development/volunteer/want_to_volunteer.shtml, or call Roger Brechner at 800-722-4673, ext. 19.

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Giving Back Instead of Giving Up

This selfless attitude was nothing new to Joe, who always found great satisfaction in offering what he could to others. Since 1972, Joe had been a volunteer with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in his community. Having grown up as one of eight children, and having raised four children of his own, Joe wanted to act as a mentor to kids who did not have the supportive family he always cherished.

Now, Joe found he could do even more for others by volunteering for Dr. Medsger's scleroderma study at the University of Pittsburgh. He went through the four-week long application process and was eventually admitted into the study in July of 2003. "My main goal," noted Joe, "was to make it through the full two-year study so I could be useful to [researchers] studying scleroderma." His attitude was one of determination and fortitude, so noted by the many researchers and assistants who met him and monitored his progress throughout the transplant. Dr. Medsger recalled Joe as having a terrific outlook throughout the study, which helped him to overcome many challenges and adversities during and after the transplant process.

Six months after his stem cell transplant, Joe was already showing signs of improvement. His lung capacity, which had diminished significantly since the onset of his scleroderma, was reading at 98%. "I was told I was making phenomenal progress," noted Joe, "But I also knew others in my study had not fared as well as I had." This knowledge made Joe fight even harder against the disease when he moved back home in October 2003 to finish his recovery. In February of 2005, Joe met with Dr. Medsger for an 18-month check-up. Although Joe's scleroderma symptoms had improved significantly, Joe was told he had a second autoimmune disease called polymyositis which caused inflamed muscles and fatigue. The last six months of his two-year goal were spent in bed overcoming these additional health challenges. But by August 2006, Joe was back on his feet, eager to recommit himself to his family, friends, and community, having successfully completed the transplant and study.

Helping Hands, Healing Hearts

These days, Joe can be found in and around his community helping those in need. "I volunteered to become the head coordinator of a charitable program in our town called *Helping Hands*," noted Joe. "We help people of little means or without family get the help or assistance they need—whether its home repairs, a place to stay for a time, or even a tank of gas to get them where they're going." In addition to his work as a coordinator, Joe continues to mentor at the Big Brothers Big Sisters chapter in his area, donating his time not only as a mentor, but also as a talented landscaper, painter, and electrician.

"I just always do what I can," says Joe, "It's so rewarding for me." Indeed, what makes a man like Joe fight for his life is similar to what makes a man assist his fellow neighbor—because life, in general, is valuable. Whether rich or poor, young or old, of ill or good health—mankind strives to live and attain happiness. For Joe, happiness resides in watching his life's good deeds manifest themselves in another's good fortune. After all, to value life is to value not only yourself, but those around you. Clearly, in spite of his scleroderma, Joe has found true happiness.