Melanoma Patient Given Months To Live Shares Survival Story

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DALLAS (CBSDFW.COM) – In April of last year, Kimberly Hinshaw felt a small, pea-sized bump on her thigh. It didn’t hurt and she says if she hadn’t been applying lotion she probably never would have noticed it. But, the tiny bump caught her attention again a few days later when it was noticeably larger.

“A few days later, I felt the exact same bump, on my upper arm,” recalls Hinshaw. “Then, I knew something was dramatically wrong.”

Soon doctors confirmed a dire diagnosis: metastatic melanoma, which means the skin cancer had spread. The time between finding the tiny bump and being told that she was going to die? “Three weeks.”

Hinshaw says she got second, third, fourth and fifth opinions. In fact, she says a full half dozen doctors suggested she get her affairs in order and get busy on that bucket list.
So, Hinshaw and some friends took off for the Catalina islands. She says it was a fabulous trip. “I felt calm, I felt relaxed, and I felt prepared for what lay ahead.”

But, she wasn't ready to stop fighting. Her journey took her to the Mary Crowley Cancer Center at Medical City Dallas Hospital—and a promising clinical trial. It is where she would also meet the center's Medical Director, John Nemunaitis, M.D.

“He said, ‘hi—I'm Dr. John... and I'm here to save your life’.”

It was an introduction worth remembering—especially if the good doctor could deliver. Dr. Nemunaitis recommended an immune-based therapy called T-VEC. Although the treatment was still in clinical trials, it had shown tremendous promise. A gene is removed from the virus that causes herpes, and re-engineered. The modified gene grows inside cancer cells; but, not in normal cells.

“Placed inside is an immune stimulating gene called GMCSF,” says Dr. Nemunaitis. “That gene turns on the immune system to recognize the cancer cells that have accepted this virus to grow into them. And when it does that, it turns on the immune response against the cancer.”

Hinshaw’s treatment involved injections twice a month for 28 weeks. She didn’t get sick. She didn’t lose her hair. But, she did get her cure.

“By scans,” she says, “there is no cancer in my body.” A surgical biopsy is planned for next week to confirm that the treatment has done its job.

And by the way, she’s ready to turn that bucket list—into a barrel.

“I do feel like I’m a walking miracle, I do. I feel like I’m alive to tell this story—that there is hope for people who can live with cancer.”

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