



Running Through My Myeloma Diagnosis With Don Wright

Don Wright
Patient Advocate

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Andrew Schorr:

Hello and welcome to Patient Power. I'm Andrew Schorr. It is so inspiring to meet someone living with cancer who is going on with a full life and where modern medicine has been of great benefit. Joining us now is someone who proves that to the nth degree, and that's Don Wright from Stillwater, Minnesota, east of St. Paul. Thanks for being with us, Don.

Don Wright:

Well, thank you for inviting me to be here. I enjoy it.

Andrew Schorr:

Well, let's tell your story a little bit. You're 75 years old, married to Artis for 53 years, diagnosed with multiple myeloma in 2003 when you had back pain. And you've been a runner, and now as of just a few months ago the Philadelphia marathon, your 100th marathon. Is that right?

Don Wright:

That's right. I'll tell you, when I was diagnosed the standard prognosis at that time was three to five years and out. And as you mentioned, that's 13 years ago and a hundred marathons ago, and in addition we've run a marathon in each of the 50 states. And my wife and daughter go with me on this, and they're not just my crew, but they run as well. They too have 50 states.

Andrew Schorr:

Oh, my goodness. What an achievement. Now, multiple myeloma is not an easy go. Certainly there's been a lot of progress, but you started with back pain, go to the doctor. They tell you this illness you have. Let's go from the shock of it to your determination to continue.

Don Wright:

Well, what's made it possible, of course, all along is the wonderful novel medications that have come along. And when one began, started to not work as well after seven years another has—another regimen has come along and has completely taken its place for a while. Myeloma doesn't give up. It keeps evolving, so I'm just hoping and praying for additional medications to come along and keep me alive, keep me running.

Andrew Schorr:

Right. Well, cancer, if you will, is a chronic condition. But it's one thing to be living with cancer, and it's another to do that and do something incredible like you running marathons. I mean, many people would say, look, I have cancer, I'm going to take it easy, but marathon is not easy.

Don Wright:

Yeah, marathon is not easy no matter how you do it. In the beginning, I was a pretty good runner and more—and I won my age group in some fairly good-size marathons. But in—in recent years, the last couple especially, I mostly walked the marathons, but that's still quite a bit of effort to walk 26 miles in six-plus hours.

Andrew Schorr:

No kidding.

Don Wright:

Walking fast. But it's still been fun. We've enjoyed the travel. It's just been a wonderful lifestyle.

Andrew Schorr:

Hmm. Now, you mentioned sort of—it's a tough, tough enemy, if you will, multiple myeloma. So you were on a single agent, one of the iMIDs, so-called, and now you're on that plus a monoclonal antibody. And then as you were telling me a little while ago dexamethasone (Decadron), which is often combined with so many of the medicines. How do you feel?

Don Wright:

I feel good. I'm not—I don't feel quite as good on dex days, I take that once a week, but otherwise I feel good. I don't have side effects, especially not from the monoclonal antibody, daratumumab (Darzalex). It just doesn't affect me at all. The other medication is—causes a little bit of neuropathy but not much to worry about. These are just miracle drugs.

Andrew Schorr:

We should tell people that running as you do probably must prove something, too. In other words, do you feel you're inspiring others, or you're inspiring yourself? I mean when you take every step, one foot in front of another, is it sort of an affirmation?

Don Wright:

People say that, people say that it's inspiring, and, you know what, I think possibly as important as anything, it's inspiring to me. I just want to keep going, and apparently it was inspiring to the pastor of my church, because I ended up speaking at all three services of the church one Sunday. It's—it's fun. People say it's inspiring, and I hope it means that they—that they take a meaning from it that's important in their lives.

Andrew Schorr:

Yeah. I think it's a good point. And also we should mention you're not retired. You're a practicing attorney. You're a consultant. So why do you do so much? A lot of people would say, well, I'm going to slow down, and you're anything but doing that.

Don Wright:

I don't know. I feel like if I slow down, well, that will be the end of life. I like—I like life. We're having a great life. My wife and I are celebrating, well, we're coming up on 54 years.

Andrew Schorr:

Wow.

Don Wright:

And that's wonderful.

Andrew Schorr:

Yeah, it sure is. So tell us, what's the plan? Is it every day—what do you think about for the near term? You mentioned you hope that the medicines keep working, or there will be something else for you. What do you think about going forward?

Don Wright:

Well, in terms of the medication, yes, I'm sticking with this medication for as long as it will do the job, and we'll see how long that is. In terms of running, I've done 100 marathons now, and I've lost my speed, because I've only been able to train for the next marathon. So I want to get my speed back. In that respect, I was at a one-mile race last night, and I have a therapist who is helping me with a training plan, and I will, I'll get my speed back to where I can run more and walk less and hopefully run continuously and participate in some of the local shorter races, 5Ks, and 10Ks and one mile.

Andrew Schorr:

Okay. So you gave that speech at church.

Don Wright:

Yeah.

Andrew Schorr:

I'm not saying you should give a speech here, but we have people with multiple myeloma who have not run a hundred marathons, maybe not working anymore, maybe not sure how well they're doing. What do you want to say to them to encourage them?

Don Wright:

To encourage them what I would say is I was at the ASH conference, the American Hematological—Hematology—American...

Andrew Schorr:

...American Society of Hematology, ASH.

Don Wright:

...and there were hundreds of papers there all focused on myeloma and its understanding and its treatments. And one company alone, one of the—one of the inspired companies that works to create treatments for myeloma had four different Phase I trials up on their board, each of them working on a different principle and each of them working on a principle different from medications that I'm now taking. And if those come through, if even one or two of those come through, becomes a successful medication, that's probably in my future.

Andrew Schorr:

We should mention that you've been in a number of clinical trials. Not all of them have worked.

Don Wright:

Right.

Andrew Schorr:

But you're probably a big believer in clinical trials, and you know that Phase I can only continue and Phase II and Phase III unless we as patients play a role.

Don Wright:

My first clinical trial carried me for seven years, and it was just amazing.

Andrew Schorr:

Well, Don Wright, I just want to wish you many days of happy running, even in the cold weather of Minnesota. I'm amazed that you're getting out there, because I live in California. I want to thank you for being with us. I want to wish you and Artis a wonderful 54th wedding anniversary when that comes up and many years to come. Thank you so much for being with us on Patient Power.

Don Wright:

Well, thank you very much, Andrew. It's my pleasure.

Andrew Schorr:

Okay. Andrew Schorr with Don Wright from Stillwater, Minnesota, running, running, running in spite of myeloma. Remember, knowledge can be the best medicine of all.

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