

Six Months to Live  
by Kevin Farris

*One man's personal story of his battle with -- and victory over -- brain tumors*

*"You have a brain tumor."*

The doctor's words sailed in one of my ears, through my head, and out my other ear without pausing long enough for my brain to digest them.

"Surely he's not talking about me," I thought. "I'm your average guy. I'm 34. I'm married. I have one kid. I go to church regularly. I love my parents. I pay my taxes. I vote. I say 'ma'am,' 'sir,' 'please,' and 'thank you'. To top it off, I love *The Andy Griffith Show*. There's no way he's talking to me!"

But he was talking to me.

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## **An Unexpected Event**

On August 14, 1999, my safe little world was rocked by a personal earthquake (a 9.0 on the Richter scale) with several aftershocks to come. It was the start of a journey which I never imagined I would take.

It was a late summer Friday, the day before my son Aaron's first birthday. I came home from work and was glad to get home to see my family and to greet my in-laws, who had come in town from South Carolina for Aaron's big day. Aaron was playing in the kitchen and I started to call to him. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I decided I was just tired and shrugged it off, laughing to my self. I went into the living room and sat on the couch. When Aaron came into the room, I tried to call Aaron, but nothing came out again.

I swallowed hard to clear my throat and tried to speak to Aaron a third time. A sound came out of me this time, but what exited my mouth was an unintelligible groan. It sounded like I was having a stroke. A tingling sensation began in my upper arms and chest. My family took me to the hospital and the ER staff at the hospital, who also thought that I was having a heart attack, found nothing wrong with me. I stayed in the hospital overnight on a 23-hour observation.

I was doing well enough on Saturday afternoon that I was allowed to go home for my son's birthday party. During my stay at the hospital that night, I underwent an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan on my head to further explore what might have happened.

At a follow-up meeting the next week, Dr. Scott Standard gave me the bad news. I had a brain tumor. As I have already said, the news did not set in at first. It took a few days to grasp it all. I remember being almost flippant about it to my friends right after I was diagnosed. Eventually more tests were ordered. They, too, were full of even worse information.

## **More Bad News**

Study of additional MRI scans revealed that I had not just one tumor, but three major tumors in my brain. Two of the large tumors were about the size and shape of a ping-pong ball. The third was on top of my brain, covering the top of my brain like a carpet.

There were also dozens of smaller tumors dotting the scan of my brain like small towns dotting a state road map. The scope of the tumors became both crystal clear and imposing.

In the months to come, MRI scans revealed growing tumors in the eye socket behind each eye. My eyeballs were running out of room in their sockets and were being pushed forward so that they were now bulging.

Many doctors reviewed the scans and they finally came to a diagnosis of Multiple Meningiomas, a non-cancerous type of tumor. While they were non-cancerous, they were still growing, and quickly running out of room. My first option was to explore the possibility of removing these tumors through surgery. It was time to take action.

## **Travels and Good Times**

My wife, Jodie, and I made three trips to seek the counsel of two of the top five brain surgeons in the world. However, both surgeons reviewed my records and determined that my tumors were “inoperable.”

Hearing the same diagnosis from two of the world’s top five brain surgeons gloomed my outlook. Knowing that surgery was not an option meant that the only treatment type left was chemotherapy. If the tumors could not be taken out, then they would have to be killed with medicine. Chemotherapy was not absolutely necessary yet and, so, these three years were filled with tests and doctors’ visits. Things were calm and peaceful for a while, given my situation. I was learning to live with my disease.

## **A Wise Move**

I felt well enough that in the summer of 2000, I left my job in marketing at Willis and became the Sports Information Director at Lipscomb University. It was a great move for me personally, professionally, spiritually, and for my health as well.

I was able to drive and move about independently for the first two years. I enjoyed immensely my first two years at Lipscomb. During this time, Jodie and I were blessed by the birth of our second son, Isaac. The birth of Isaac was very much on purpose; and it was to give Aaron someone with whom he could grow up. Being in a Christian environment on a daily basis at Lipscomb and having a terrific home congregation meant that I had literally thousands of people praying on my behalf every day. I would need those prayers soon. Very soon.

## **A Change of Diagnosis**

Soon the tumors were so large that they had filled the sockets behind my eyeballs and were reaching around to the corners of my eyes. They could easily be felt by someone’s finger at the outside corner of my eyes. (The tumor behind my left eye can still be felt in the corner at my eyelid.)

Dr. Louise Mawn was able to safely surgically remove a piece of the tumor in the corner of my left eye and perform a biopsy. The results of the biopsy rocked my world again.

My disease was re-diagnosed as Erdheim-Chester Disease, not Multiple Meningiomas. This disease, too, was not cancerous, but Erdheim-Chester Disease is a very rare disease (less than 100 cases worldwide had been reported since 1920) and no cure was known for it. I reissued my prayer requests. I knew I could not rely on medicine alone to save my life. And yet, the worst was yet to come.

## **The Steep Downward Slide**

In 2002 I underwent a different kind of scan – a P.E.T. (Positron Emission Tomography) scan – which is designed to reveal the level of activity in tumors. If activity shows up on a P.E.T. scan, the scan is said to ‘light up’. The scan was taken of my whole body. The P.E.T. scan ‘lit up’ over and over in my body, revealing tumors growing in my brain, eyes, abdomen and near my heart. The tumors in my abdomen did not present a threat, but the tumor near my heart placed my heart in danger – especially since this tumor, too, was also diagnosed as “inoperable.” Once again, it was time to act.

## **Radiation and Chemo**

Under Dr. Mawn’s direction, I began radiation on the tumors behind my eyes at Vanderbilt in the summer of 2002. The goal was to kill the tumors behind my eyes. An impending side effect loomed from the radiation – blindness. Since I was already facing the possibility of blindness from the tumors themselves, I really did not see this as a big gamble. The growing tumors in both eyes, combined with the effects of the radiation left me legally blind in my right eye and almost completely blind in my left eye.

My doctors suggested chemotherapy, not radiation or surgery for the tumors in my brain and torso. I was open to the idea since it seemed to be my only option. I went through two different four-week rounds of chemo with two different drugs. Tests continued to show no progress.

Another health scare struck during this time. A CT scan showed some fluid around my heart. Doctors moved swiftly and performed a pericardial window on my heart. This involved cutting a slit between two of my ribs, inserting a tube to my heart, and puncturing the sac around my heart. One liter of fluid was drained from that sac around my heart.

A group of friends began cutting my yard. I soon became unable to drive my car anymore. Co-workers drove me to work and took me home from work. No one was told to do any of these things, but they did it because of their Christian nature. Additionally, I was allowed to nap during the days when my chemo was doing its worst damage.

All of my normal activities came to a screeching halt. I was in my darkest hour and it was even darker than I thought it was. I did not find out this fact until 2006, but it was about this time (around June 2003) during struggles with my disease and the chemotherapy that my doctors came to the unofficial conclusion (among themselves) that they would be surprised if I lived just another six months.

## **One Last Shot**

There is an old saying “Desperate times require desperate measures.” In June 2003, Dr. Jagasia came up with one more idea for a chemotherapy treatment. Running out of options, I quickly agreed to it. After just four treatments I had to stop. However, a MRI was scheduled for December of 2003 to see if this new treatment was working. That was still two months away and I was impatient to learn the results. I enjoyed Halloween and Thanksgiving with my family and friends. I was grateful to God for each new day. Unknown to me, an unofficial six-month clock had been started in June. It was now November and I had almost – literally – run out of time.

## **A Christmas Gift**

In early December 2003, I returned to the hospital for a P.E.T. scan. “It will be more of the same,” I said to myself. However, I was blessed beyond my wildest dreams.

The results of the scan indicated that there was NO activity of any kind in ANY of my tumors. This meant that the tumors were either dead or dormant. All that was left of the tumors were masses of tissue. I will never forget those moments of excitement on the doctors' faces when they shared with me the good news from the P.E.T. scans. My physicians labeled the results of the P.E.T. scan as "incredible" and "unbelievable".

I would love to say that I fell to my knees to give thanks to God for His unbelievable mercy when I heard the news. But I cannot. I was numb and it didn't really sink in at first. I was used to not getting my hopes up and didn't want to be devastated if the diagnosis did not hold true. Needless to say, it took a while for the news to sink in.

After four years of fighting and praying; wondering and worrying; chemo and radiation; my fight had taken a complete about-face. Jodie and I responded following the next Sunday morning worship to share the good news with our church family. It was a message of great news and even more thanks to God above. It would not be the last such announcement we would make.

### **Prayers Answered (one year later)**

One year later in December 2004, P.E.T. scans confirmed that the diagnosis was holding firm. Again, no activity was seen in any of my tumors. My disease was now officially medically diagnosed as "in remission." I asked my doctor, "Is it time for me to get busy living or get busy dying?" He replied confidently, "It's time for you to get busy living."

In December 2005, a follow-up P.E.T. scan showed no changes. Since my diagnosis had held true for a year, scans were moved to an annual basis (they had been conducted every six months since my great news). MRI scans revealed that some of the tumors were slightly shrinking in size.

### **From Here to Eternity**

Now I must learn to deal with the effects of this disease and the damage done to my body. I have gone through physical therapy and I am now out of a wheelchair and I am using a walker when I am out and about.

We still live in the same two-story house, but I no longer have difficulty going up and down the stairs. My leg strength has returned well. In September 2006, I returned to work. It is a part-time job, but it is great being busy and among friends again.

Also in 2006 I made two trips to Pascagoula, Mississippi to take part in relief campaigns for victims of Hurricane Katrina. I am thankful that I feel well enough to go and do what I can.

While I do not wish this disease on anyone, it is my sincere prayer that someone else who already has this disease will also find relief as I have. I thank everyone who has prayed for me and I thank God above and His son Jesus Christ for their providence and mercy.