

# New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH TREATMENT



Issue 14

## A US Coast Guard lieutenant and colon cancer survivor

learned that bad things do come in threes, but that good things come in dozens.



Today, Lieutenant Robert Hendrickson is a joke-cracker with a quick wit and the nickname of *SpongeBob*. Not many years ago, however, his life was anything but cartoon-funny.

Hendrickson had always been a responsible custodian of his own health. Both his mother and his mother's father had had colon cancer, so at the age of 33, he was concerned enough about his risk of getting the disease that he went to the clinic on his Coast Guard base to get a colonoscopy.

He was told he was too young.

About a year later, that declaration began to appear wrong. Hendrickson started feeling unusually tired. Then his bathroom habits changed. Next, he gained considerable weight and began to have heart palpitations. He also developed a persistent cough. By July 2001, he says, "I couldn't walk across the room without getting out of breath."

Finally, he went to a doctor and a blood test found significant anemia (low levels of red blood cells). Hendrickson was quickly moved to the Bethesda Naval Hospital, where in August a colonoscopy uncovered the problem: Hendrickson had stage two colon cancer. It was a horrifying experience, but one he tells today with an eye for the humor in the situation. He knew it had to be an accurate diagnosis because, he says, "The same doctor who did my colonoscopy did the president's!"

Shortly after his colonoscopy, Hendrickson had surgery. His medical team removed about two-thirds of his colon.

Sadly, the lieutenant's home life took a difficult turn at that time, too – his wife filed for a divorce. So with his ex-wife and children remaining near Williamsburg, Virginia, Hendrickson moved alone to Bethesda, Maryland, to begin his six months of chemotherapy. He signed the lease on his apartment on a fateful day, September 11, 2001.

"It was tough," he said. "Fortunately I found the [Cancer Survivors Network](#)<sup>SM</sup> (CSN) and they took over for my family and friends. Just the day-to-day support and genuine friendship and love that exudes from people at the survivors network was very helpful."

Hendrickson and his friends from the [colon cancer discussion board](#) at CSN have become a remarkable, ongoing, and colorful support group, who call themselves the "Semi-Colons." In 2005 the group began meeting at semi-annual getaways they call "Colonpalooza."

Hendrickson's screen name on CSN is *SpongeBob* – like the absorbent, bright yellow, happy-go-lucky cartoon character on television. "He fits his name well," says one CSN member. "He brings a lot of humor to the site; and he's very tactful, too."

Hendrickson believes that colon cancer has changed his character – and for the better, making him more like the soft, squishy *SpongeBob*. Today, he strives to share his emotions, to be more open, and to do whatever he can to support other people who are facing colon cancer.

For about three years now, Hendrickson has been what cancer survivors call "NED" (no evidence of disease), but he has also learned that he carries the gene for [hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer](#), which may make him vulnerable to future battles with cancer.

Amazingly, Hendrickson isn't mad that doctors wouldn't give him a colonoscopy when he first asked. "I'm a little bit annoyed about that, but in retrospect, I can't be angry because it was ignorance," he says. "Life goes on; you take the lesson and move forward."

Kinda like *SpongeBob* might do.

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