

New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH TREATMENT



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Prostate Cancer Survivor Finds the *Hope* in Hope Lodge

In 2006, Skip Learned was 51 and the poster boy for a healthy lifestyle. He played tennis twice a week, lifted weights, worked full-time as a facilities manager for the public schools in Barrington, Rhode Island, and was a family man with a wife and two teenagers.

Learned had always been in good shape, so when his physical that June 2006 detected an elevated PSA level, a possible sign of prostate cancer, he didn't worry too much. He was convinced a consultation with a urologist would reveal some mistake with the PSA test.

"I thought, there's no way that I could have cancer," Learned recalls. "Then when I had the biopsy, there it was. That was a shock."

Learned investigated options

Although his urologist suggested surgical treatment, Learned was reluctant because of the possible side effects, which can include incontinence and impotence. He and his wife, Betsy, began researching other treatment options – online, and in conversation with others. Then they went to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and met with three doctors, each with a different approach.

Skip chose an option 1,100 miles away

After weighing all of the information he and his wife had received, Learned decided on a treatment approach at a radiation facility in Atlanta. He would first receive radioactive seed implants, and then seven weeks of external radiation therapy.

There was just one problem: With Skip's wife working full-time, his son beginning high school, and his daughter beginning college, taking the whole family south wasn't realistic. Learned was going to have to go it alone.

All of Learned's research paid off

A gentleman he had contacted for a reference for Atlanta physicians had told him about Hope Lodges, the American Cancer Society's free housing centers for cancer patients in treatment. There are 22 Hope Lodges throughout the United States, and Learned immediately got on the waiting list for the one in Atlanta.

It took several weeks for a spot to open up and, in the meantime, Learned stayed in a hotel. Although he joined a local gym and even managed to find some tennis partners, he still felt isolated. "I was in a strange city where I knew no one and I was by myself, and my treatment was 15 minutes a day and that was the only thing I had to do," he recalls. "It was very lonely."

That all changed when Learned moved into Hope Lodge for the final three weeks of his treatment. The Lodge has private bedrooms and bathrooms for its guests, but communal areas for cooking, eating, and socializing. According to Learned, that design encourages guests to get to know each other, and Skip took advantage of it. He quickly met other men at the Lodge

who were also being treated for prostate cancer and found it helpful to compare notes with them as his radiotherapy progressed.

He came home with a changed attitude

His treatments completed, Learned returned home just before Thanksgiving of 2006. Although he struggled at first with fatigue and some urinary side effects, he now is back to doing all the things he used to do. What's changed, he says, is his attitude, a change he attributes partly to his stay at Hope Lodge. "Something like this really makes you appreciate everything," he says. "Life is the most precious thing."

Now that he's home, Learned says he plans to get involved with the American Cancer Society on multiple levels.

"For one thing, I'm going to refocus my charitable donations, because now I know firsthand where the money goes. And it's going to a really good place."

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