



In the News

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The Advocate

Gary Zollinger—A Force for Good

Amid symptoms of increasing coughing and shortness of breath, Gary Zollinger, then 55, knew he wasn't suffering from the common maladies suggested by his doctors. When his cough got worse, he sought care at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center, where he was diagnosed with stage 4 bronchoalveolar carcinoma, a slow-growing lung cancer.

“The situation for Gary was almost a double tragedy,” says Gary’s wife, Thelissa Zollinger. “Because he had never smoked, his symptoms were passed off as asthma, a bad cold, allergies.”

Although doctors told the couple there was no chance of cure, Gary enrolled in clinical trials, but to no avail. A rarely done double lung transplant prolonged Gary’s life long enough to see the creation of the Gary L. and Thelissa Zollinger Early Detection of Lung Cancer Endowment Fund. Gary died in September at age 58.

Only a week after his transplant, Gary made a goal to become “a force for good”—which would become his motto—for future patients who would struggle with the disease. While still in the hospital, Gary met with representatives from the University of Colorado Foundation about setting up the endowment to fund lung cancer screening research. Completed in December 2006, the endowment has since grown to \$300,000, Thelissa says.

A portion of the fund came from donations raised through a 5K run/walk in May named the Gift of Life and Breath (www.thegiftoflifeandbreath.com), held on the one-year anniversary of Gary’s transplant. “We thought we’d get maybe 100 of our friends and neighbors, but it just exploded,” Thelissa says. “When it got to 350 people ... we had to shut down the website, and even at that, we still got a number more.” About 400 people attended the race.

The endowment money has been earmarked for early detection research headed by Michael Weyant, MD, a surgeon at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (who performed Gary’s transplant surgery). “We hope to be able to find not one test but a panel of tests,” Dr. Weyant says, including tests of patients’ blood, serum, and sputum to better identify people who should receive more extensive screening, including computed tomography.

The next step for Thelissa Zollinger is to create a foundation for the endowment. “One of the ways I am dealing with this tremendous loss is following through on his great desire to screen for this deadly disease, and giving people the gift of life and breath beyond a stage 4 diagnosis.”



Gary Zollinger and his wife, Thelissa, at the Gift of the Life and Breath fundraiser in May.