

Patrick McCarron Story

Patrick McCarron was a healthy, robust Montanan.

Fifty-nine-years-old, he never used tobacco, only had one cup of coffee in his life, and hadn't had a drink in 20 years. Each May, he would bike the annual Tour of the Swan River Valley (TOSRV), a two-day, challenging bicycle tour of 110 miles each day traveling from Missoula to Swan Lake and back to Missoula again.

In October 2006, he found a lump on the outside of his throat. Thinking it was just some sort of infection, his doctor prescribed antibiotics. The lump didn't go down, but it didn't get any worse.

Then another lump popped up on the other side of his throat. He also noticed he was getting tired more easily, and had trouble breathing at times. For someone who was so physically fit, and relying on his fitness to work, that meant trouble.

You see, Patrick is a farrier, a specialist in making horseshoes. His inspiration for a career in horseshoeing harkens back to his grandfather, a blacksmith who emigrated from Ireland to Michigan. Patrick's strength allows him to take iron, heat and bend it to form a shoe for a horse—using his grandfather's anvil.

He had been contemplating a move; it was getting too crowded and busy in western Montana for his tastes. Running a business, over scheduling, hurrying to the next thing, kept Patrick, like many of us, distracted from himself, family, good friends and health. But then came the cancer diagnosis: squamous cell carcinoma at the base of the tongue. Squamous cell carcinoma of the head and neck is most commonly associated with the use of alcohol and tobacco—something Patrick didn't use.

So Patrick started his cancer regimen with chemotherapy, then after 6 weeks of chemo, Patrick began radiation therapy for 7 weeks.

The reality of his friendships and the kindness of others became a clear focus and source of support during his treatment and recovery.

His friends and relatives came out in droves. One woman dropped off a car that got better mileage than his pickup for him to drive back and forth from Victor to Missoula. He didn't have to worry about driving himself, his friends signed up to take him to treatment and back every weekday for his months of treatment. His farrier friends tacked up notes of support to Patrick's door. No need for conversation—it was just what this brother- and sister- hood would do. Meals showed up at his doorstep. The support of a community was powerful medicine.

Patrick accepted the many prayer groups who offered to put them in their prayers. Prayers were offered in abundance—Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Native. He wasn't denying or discounting any type of help, from standardized medicine to friendship.

And a year after his diagnosis, Patrick is getting his energy back, and thinking about the future. “I have so much gratitude,” he says. “I took so much for granted.”

Dr. Markette, his radiation oncologist, says, “We have great technology, but cancer treatment is not just about the best and latest equipment. Patients need to feel cared for. Part of being cared for is your home and your family.”

“Ever since I was young, I’ve been athletic and felt invincible.” Patrick says. “Now I know I’m here by the grace of good friends and good people.”