

## Touched by cancer, two families carry on

By Kim Grizzard

Published August 18, 2008

Last year, on what he thought might be his death bed, Dr. John Gibbs made a promise of sorts. If he made it through, this physician would never forget how it felt to be a patient battling cancer.

As they prayed for their son's life, Parham and Jennifer Stanley had a similar sentiment. Whatever was ahead for 2-year-old Beau, they would become proponents for parents of those fighting the disease.

In late November, Gibbs was back at work. Within the week, Beau was laid to rest. Though one life was taken and another one spared, both have become driving forces behind **Beau's Buddies** Cancer Fund.

The charity, designed to improve the lives of local cancer patients and their families, is planning its first fundraiser next month. A Sept. 21 dinner and auction, followed by a Sept. 22 golf tournament, will help finance **Beau's Buddies**, which has adopted the motto, "Friends Helping Friends."

A small group of friends getting together for golf was what Gibbs had in mind when he lay in bed at Duke University Medical Center and dreamed of life after cancer. If he ever got strong enough to swing a club again, Gibbs had hoped to get 10 people to play a round and make a donation to Pitt County Memorial Hospital.

"It's not really something that I necessarily planned on being a big deal," Gibbs said. "But cancer is a big deal."

Diagnosed at age 38 after a CT scan he ordered for himself, Gibbs underwent chemotherapy and surgery for liposarcoma, a rare, malignant tumor. He lost 30 pounds and spent more than 40 days in the hospital, wondering if he would ever return to his practice at Greenville's East Carolina Neurology.

"My doctor always believed in me, but there were doctors that told me to more or less get my affairs in order," Gibbs said. "I never thought I was ever going to be in remission."

When doctors announced that he was, Gibbs had a list of things he wanted to do. Far from the daredevil "Bucket List" featured in the movie by the same name, Gibbs' goals were few.

"I basically wanted to do three things in my life with the rest of the time I had," he said. "I wanted to go back to my practice for one day and to do some different things with people that I couldn't do before, based on some experiences I had by being a patient."

"The second thing I wanted to do, when people asked me about my story and what had happened to me, I wanted to tell them the peace the Lord has given me in my life during the worst time," Gibbs said. "The third thing was to be a champion for people with cancer."

To help him fulfill his ambition, two friends, Ben Parrott and Dr. Bryan Cooper - now members of the board for **Beau's Buddies** - introduced him to David Vaughn, a Greenville business owner who had been successful in raising money for a baseball field and playground for special-needs children.

Vaughn listened to Gibbs talk about wanting to help people who were battling cancer. Vaughn had personal knowledge of what families face; Parham Stanley works as a project manager for Vaughn's construction company. When he heard the Stanleys' story, Gibbs felt he had found a name for the new charity.

**Beau's Buddies'** golf tournament would be a tribute to the bald, blue-eyed toddler who loved to hit golf balls in the family's yard and ride the golf cart with his grandfather. Perhaps the only siren that called louder to 2-year-old Beau was that of a fire engine. Among the highlights of his young life were getting to ride in one and having firefighters climb a ladder to wave at him through the window of the hospital room, where Beau spent most of the last year of his life.

Beau was 17 months old when doctors diagnosed him with neuroblastoma, a relatively rare cancer of the sympathetic nervous system. Over the next year, he spent more than 200 days in the hospital.

"That's normal for some of these kids," said Jennifer Stanley, a respiratory therapist at PCMH. "They all spend more of their time there than they spend at home."

Organizers hope funding from **Beau's Buddies** can create a more home-like environment in hospitals for children and adults who must spend so much time there. The group hopes that even little things, like toys for the playroom or magazine subscriptions, can help make a difference.

"Even if it's for a day, to make it easier when they're battling this awful disease," said Debbie Hudson, office manager for David G. Vaughn Construction and board member for **Beau's Buddies**. "If a kid was having treatment and he needed a little Nintendo to play, just to be a kid." **Beau's Buddies** hopes to provide support for families of patients, helping out with everything from phone cards for long-distance calls to assistance with rent or utilities.

"This disease touches so many people," Hudson said. "... The majority of the time people want to do something and they don't know what they can do. This is an opportunity for a lot of people not to sit on the sidelines but to do something for someone."

While Gibbs was being treated at Duke, the neurologist gained a new understanding of the way patients miss the comforts of home.

"Disease is the great equalizer. It didn't matter that I had five letters behind my name once I got in the hospital," he said.

"We move into some hotel, but it isn't a hotel. This is a hotel of horrors. ... I saw the horror of cancer as I lived it. I wanted to help do something for patient services."

Though he often felt too sick to care, Gibbs said would have liked to have been able to choose what kind of food he was served. And he would have wanted a more comfortable chair for his mother, who stayed by his side through the entire ordeal.

Parham said many family members never go home during their loved ones' treatment. Without support from friends and relatives, errands can go undone and bills unpaid.

"It does turn your world upside down," he said. "There is no normal, everyday life."

While the Stanleys were surrounded by family and friends, not everyone has that.

"There are a lot of people standing there empty-handed," Parham said. "Hopefully (**Beau's Buddies**) will be able to provide that support."

Nearly nine months after Beau's death, the Stanleys still have a network of support that includes not only friends and family but doctors, nurses and even firefighters who remember Beau. Some are volunteering for **Beau's Buddies** in honor of the boy they had little time to get to know.

"My worst fear was that Beau was going to be forgotten," Jennifer said. "He was only 2 and a half, but he was special. I just don't want people to forget that."

Gibbs is reminded of cancer every day. There is a numbness in his chest and a footlong scar on his back from where surgeons removed a 9-pound tumor.

"I don't really want to forget about cancer because it's done more good for me than bad, even though it's the worst thing that ever happened to me," Gibbs said. "It strengthened my faith."

He has to sometimes diagnose the disease in his patients, though he does so with a sense of empathy he never knew until last year.

"I drive past that hospital every day; my office is across the street," Gibbs said. "I think sometimes we forget that there are some people in there. ... I just want to make sure that cancer patients know that there was somebody that remembered them."

The **Beau's Buddies** Cancer Fund dinner auction will be held Sept. 21 at the Hilton Greenville, followed by a golf tournament Sept. 22 at the Greenville Country Club. For more information, visit [beausbuddies.com](http://beausbuddies.com) or call 321-7290. Registration deadline is Sept. 15.

Kim Grizzard can be contacted at [kgrizzard@coxnc.com](mailto:kgrizzard@coxnc.com) or 329-9578.