

Retired prof. hopes memories will spark smiles

by Shane Arman - Wednesday, November 26, 2008

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When Craig Fiedler watched “The Bucket List” (2008), a movie about two terminally ill cancer patients who set out on a journey to fulfill their last wishes, he never expected to be in a similar situation two weeks later.

It started with a seemingly harmless dry cough. Fiedler, a retired University of Wisconsin Oshkosh special education professor, told his doctor about it during his annual physical. X-rays showed a golf-ball-sized tumor in his right lung.

Fiedler went through two weeks of tests and was diagnosed with stage IV terminal lung cancer on Jan. 28, 2008. He never smoked and didn’t have a family history of lung cancer, which leaves him wondering the cause of his illness.

“You think it’s never going to happen to you,” Fiedler said.

Fiedler’s wife Sharon said the initial news was overwhelming and devastating. “It was absolutely the last thing that we would have ever thought would happen to him,” Sharon said. “Lung cancer just really sort of knocked us for a loop.”

In May 2008, Fiedler applied for early disability retirement from UW Oshkosh in order to spend more time with his family.

“It’s been a huge adjustment for me and my family,” Fiedler said. “I had planned to teach for several more years before retiring, and I kind of just hit a brick wall and everything ends abruptly.”

‘Bucket list’

After Fiedler’s retirement in May, he embarked on a traveling spree with Sharon that included trips to Alaska, New York and the Dominican Republic.

“My wife and I decided we’d start doing some of the things we’d always talked about doing,” Fiedler said.

Fiedler may be terminally ill, but he isn’t going down without a fight.

“I believe in the mind-body connection,” Fiedler said. From his recent research, Fiedler has discovered that attitude can have a large impact on survival of cancer patients, so he makes a point of appreciating every day.

“Courage in my cancer battle is getting up everyday and putting one foot in front of the other,” Fiedler

said. "It's not heroic; it simply is my life as I must lead it right now."

Impact on UW Oshkosh

In addition to his work as a special education professor, Fiedler held different administrative positions at UW Oshkosh, including interim associate vice chancellor, interim dean for the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) and chair for the special education department.

Fiedler's many accomplishments and scholarly contributions to the University earned him the prestigious Chancellor's Medallion from Chancellor Richard H. Wells, which will be awarded at the Dec. 12 commencement ceremony.

"The award recognizes and applauds people who have done some extraordinary things in the service of other people and other communities," Wells said of the medallion, which is given out to two recipients each year. "Craig is pretty well recognized throughout the country in terms of the work that he does."

Associate Dean of the COEHS Michael Beeth worked as an administrator with Fiedler for five years and said he frequently tried to improve conditions for students and faculty.

"He was always thoughtful and knowledgeable about what needed to be done," Beeth said.

Beeth said Fiedler was a crucial part in advancing the Alternative Careers in Teaching (ACT) program, which provides career opportunities for college graduates seeking teaching jobs. Without Fiedler, the program would not have received the National Science Foundation (NSF) grant.

Almost all of Fiedler's scholarly work focuses on how parents and teachers can be better advocates for people with disabilities. Fiedler has written five books, eight chapters in text books, and dozens of articles in scholarly publications and has received many awards and grants to research special education. Since 1987, Fiedler has made more than 350 presentations at professional conferences, schools, parent organizations and other community groups.

Leaving a legacy

Since his diagnosis, Fiedler has written a 200-page manuscript outlining how he is dealing with cancer. The book is titled "Robbery and Redemption: Cancer as Identity Theft."

"I wanted to leave something substantial for my friends and family explaining my thoughts and feelings as I went through this life-altering event," Fiedler said.

Although it's been a therapeutic process for Fiedler to transcribe his thoughts, the manuscript also serves a broader purpose.

"He's trying to pull in as many resources that he can so that perhaps someone else could gain something from his experiences," Sharon said.

"Robbery and Redemption" describes the change in Fiedler's perspective on life, his interaction with

various physicians and everything he has learned from living life with cancer.

Fiedler hopes he has left fond memories for the countless individuals whose lives he has touched.

“I’d be satisfied if, when people think of me, they can remember at least one interaction they had with me that leaves a smile on their face,” Fiedler said. “I’d be satisfied with that as a legacy.”