

DEFYING Metastatic Melanoma:

Tarpon Springs Roofing Contractor Thrives On Keytruda Trial

By Michelle Bearden

Carl Paulk is a dedicated ambassador for sun protection. He's never outside without a wide-brimmed hat that covers his ears and neck, and SPF 70 sunblock on any exposed skin. He urges friends and strangers alike to get regular dermatology checkups. And he preaches about early detection at every chance he gets. If you see a small bump or mole, he says, get it checked – immediately.

He should know. Working in the family roofing business for more than 30 years kept him in the hot sun most days and nearly led to Paulk's death.

In 2006, the Tarpon Springs man, then 57, felt a lump behind his left ear. His dermatologist took a biopsy on a Thursday, and the lump bled. The next day she called Paulk with the worst news possible: melanoma. She was able to schedule an appointment with him at Moffitt for Monday.

“You get news like this, and your whole world stops,” Paulk says.

Unlike many other skin cancers, melanoma cells can spread quickly to vital organs. There was a ray of hope: If caught early, the disease is almost always curable. But if it gets just a little bit thicker, or if the cells break free and get into the lymph nodes, it can turn into a deadly and treatment-resistant disease.

Paulk and his wife, Sharon, met with Moffitt surgeon Gerard Mosiello, M.D., to discuss the upcoming surgical procedure. Fortunately, the cancer had not spread to Paulk's lymph nodes.

After surgery Paulk went through an arduous schedule of daily radiation for a month. He then underwent a 30-day round of chemotherapy, followed by interferon three times a week for a year. After periodic checkups, Paulk seemed to be responding well and was feeling optimistic that he would get an all-clear report. But it wasn't to be. Instead, the doctor found that the cancer had spread to his neck. Tests revealed three tumors and the worst possible news: stage 4 melanoma.

Paulk enrolled in a clinical trial with an experimental drug, but after a few treatments, it became clear that was not an option. His liver enzymes had skyrocketed. His weight was dropping, and he was weak. But another option was available – this time a trial with pembrolizumab (Keytruda®), an anti-PD-1 inhibitor. Paulk felt this was his best chance at survival. PD-1 refers to a cellular pathway that restricts the body's immune system from attacking melanoma cells.

In October 2012, he began a regimen that mandated visits to

Moffitt for treatment every three weeks for an undetermined amount of time. The fact that Moffitt is one of the world leaders in early-phase and mid-phase trials in metastatic melanoma also meant Paulk was in the best possible place to battle his particular disease.

“I was willing to try anything,” Paulk says of his decision. “It was too early in the development stages to know if it would work, but I felt the alternatives weren't too promising.”

Almost immediately, his condition began to improve. Every 12 weeks, he underwent brain and body scans to monitor his progress. The tumors – one large and two small ones – began



Photography: Cliff McBride

shrinking. Even better, he didn't have side effects generally associated with some drugs. The roofing company is still in operation, with Paulk at the helm and his middle daughter, Stephanie, working alongside him. He feels strong enough that he still climbs on roofs to get estimates, but he leaves the physical labor to his workers.

And more good news: In September 2014, two years after Paulk began the trial, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the new cancer immunotherapy for treatment of patients with advanced or unresectable melanoma who are no longer responding to other drugs. The approval is a major milestone in the treatment of the disease.

Though the trial is complete, Paulk continues to get the drug every three weeks. He will stick with the treatment indefinitely, so researchers can determine whether there are any long-term ramifications. Meanwhile, his tumors continue to get smaller. 🎧