

R E N O W N

# JOURNEY

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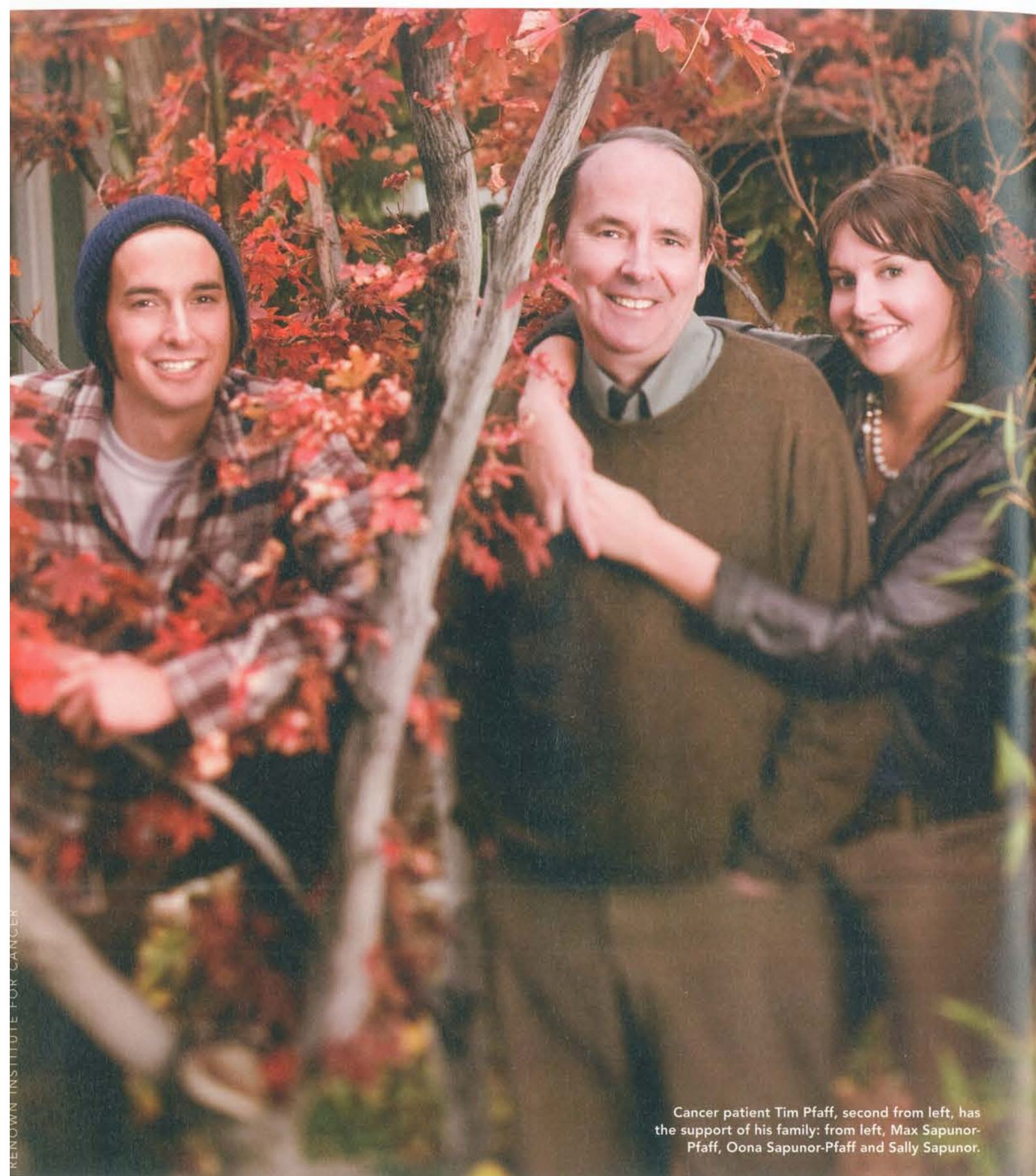
## Supporting role

Caregivers help family and friends through cancer treatment

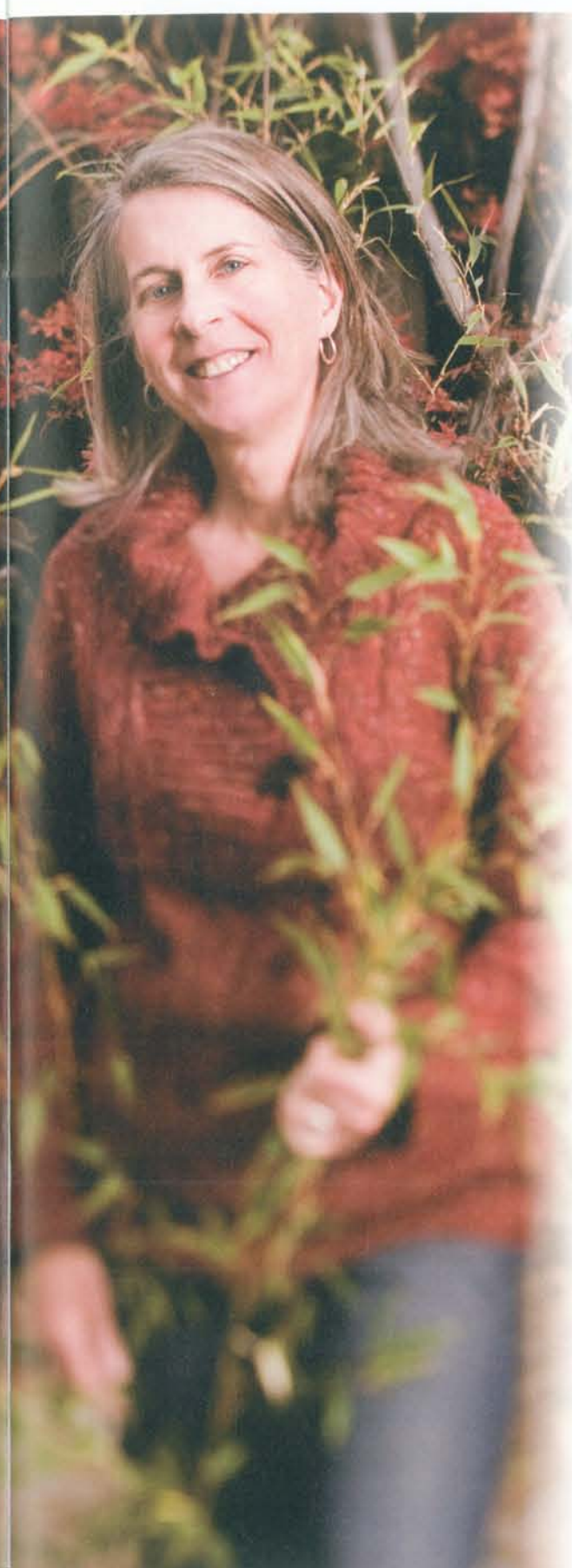
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Cancer patient Tim Pfaff, second from left, has the support of his family: from left, Max Sapunor-Pfaff, Oona Sapunor-Pfaff and Sally Sapunor.



# { Let them eat cake

Loved ones learn support techniques to help cancer patients heal

**R**EGISTERED DIETICIAN SEAN WALSH HAS SOME UNCONVENTIONAL ADVICE for those caring for people with cancer.

"If they want chocolate cake for breakfast, please give them chocolate cake for breakfast," he laughed.

His advice is not meant to belittle the situation, but rather to emphasize the importance of calorie intake when cancer patients are undergoing such treatments as chemotherapy and radiation, which can sometimes result in nausea and weight loss. And it's also meant to highlight the critical role loved ones play in the recovery process.

"Recovery is a team effort," he said. "But unfortunately, the patient's family often has more to deal with on a day-to-day basis than the patient himself. So pick your battles. Let them eat anything they want, and we'll worry about undoing that damage after they've recovered."

Walsh leads an ongoing series of classes at Renown called Nutrition and Cancer: Let's Talk, a discussion forum for caregivers who find themselves trying to encourage healing through good nutrition.

"Family members understandably get frustrated watching someone they love who's just not hungry and can't eat," he said. "But we try to show them different ways to work around the process, offering them some measure of control."

One way is through planning. Walsh points out that often a patient is hungry one minute, but 20 minutes later has no appetite at all.

"So it's important to have meals prepared," he said.

But perhaps the most helpful aspect of Walsh's class is the sharing that happens as loved ones bring up their concerns, fears and doubts.

"It's so important for them to realize they're not alone," he said. "Most of the time, their concerns are not new — 90 percent of the people in the room are dealing with the same symptoms and problems. So half the battle is getting it off their minds and out in the open, sharing ideas that worked and ideas that didn't."

Such is the philosophy behind the Coping with Caregiving Support Group offered to family members and loved ones at Renown Institute for Cancer. Group facilitator Diana Brown, LCSW, says these bi-weekly meetings provide a place for caregivers to open up and share.

"We let the person vent, cry, laugh, talk — whatever they need to do that particular day," Brown said. "Cancer patients in general sometimes do not feel well and must focus on themselves and their treatment. The

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## Let them eat cake

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stress can sometimes cause them to be highly emotional or short-tempered, and they might lose sight of the fact that their partners are just as scared, depressed and anxious as they are."

So with the support offered through commonality of experience, group participants often walk away with a sense of relief.

"We allow them to focus on themselves for a few minutes out of a day," Brown said. "And we encourage them to take care of themselves in order to care for their partner. They truly need to find some time to pamper themselves without any feelings of guilt."

Reno's Sally Sapunor knew she needed to care for herself in order to care for her 59-year-old husband Tim Pfaff, who was diagnosed in 2006 with stage four brain cancer. An educator and licensed marriage and family therapist, she recognized the necessity of finding an outlet to voice her victories and tribulations.

"There are definitely times when I need to be able to talk freely without worrying about offending him or upsetting him," Sapunor said. "The other participants and facilitators

## Pack on the Pounds mini-chocolate cake

(Makes 12 servings)

If chocolate cake is a favorite for a loved one going through cancer treatment, try this high-calorie, decadent recipe offered by registered dietician Sean Walsh:

4 eggs	1 teaspoon almond extract (vanilla, orange, cherry, banana or other flavor extracts can be used)
1¾ cup unsalted butter	
7 ounces mini chocolate chips (dark chocolate is preferable)	1 tablespoon cocoa powder
1 cup sugar	

Preheat oven to 350F. Lightly grease a cupcake pan.

Remove eggs from the refrigerator about 30 minutes before using them or put them in a bowl of lukewarm water while assembling other ingredients.

Melt the butter and chocolate together in the microwave. Stir this mixture every 30 seconds to prevent burning.

Once the chocolate/butter mixture has been melted, stir in sugar and allow to cool for 2-3 minutes. When the chocolate mixture has cooled, whisk in eggs, one at a time.

Whisk in vanilla extract and cocoa powder.

Pour batter evenly into prepared pan(s) and bake for 9-11 minutes. Turn off oven and let cakes sit inside for an additional 10-12 minutes.

Place pan on a wire cooling rack and allow to cool completely. A spatula can be used to gently turn out the cakes before serving.

## Notes for caregivers

There is much you can do to help your friend or loved one through cancer treatment. Here, registered dietician Sean Walsh offers ideas to help you cope:

- Be prepared for the patient's tastes to change from day to day. Some days he or she won't want favorite foods because they don't taste good. Other times, he or she will be able to eat a dish that couldn't be tolerated just the day before.
- Have food within easy reach at home.
- Have meals and snacks ready so the patient can have something to eat when he or she is ready.
- Be prepared for times when the patient is able to eat only one or two foods for a few days in a row, until side effects diminish. Even if he or she can't eat at all, still encourage plenty of fluids.
- Try not to push the patient into eating and drinking. Encourage and support without being overwhelming.

provide a listening ear and even some validation. I leave sometimes thinking to myself, 'So I'm not crazy, that same thing has happened for them, too...'"

The kind of support she receives from the Renown group, she notes, is different from the kind provided by family and friends.

"Until you're in this situation, until it happens to you, it's hard to imagine the reality," she said. "You're in a group with people in the exact same boat, so you form a close bond. Plus, with my friends and family, I don't necessarily want to burden them when I'm feeling down."

Brown says group participants get to know each other and can often identify when someone has had a particularly troubling week.

"We sometimes spot it when they walk in," she said. "And so we might give that person more time to talk if they want, try to help them process their feelings, or just let them relax and listen. We're here to support them in the manner that best meets their needs."

Sapunor adds that the overriding tone of each meeting is by no means heavy and sad.

"We laugh a lot," she said. "It may be warped humor sometimes, a little dark, but there's lots of levity. It's important to remember that we're all going through a lot of change and a lot of anticipatory loss and grief. But I thank God for groups like this that are so helpful and entirely free." ■

*For a list of support groups offered at Renown Institute for Cancer, see page 31. More information about support services and support groups is available at [www.renown.org/cancer](http://www.renown.org/cancer) or by calling 775-982-6830.*