

In April 2018, several days after severe back pain sent Jeff Phillips to the emergency room, he received an alarming diagnosis: stage IV lung cancer.

"My mind went blank," says Phillips. "I was scared and stayed scared for a long time."

Phillips was treated by medical oncologist L. Stuart Nagasawa, MD, at Providence Mission Hospital. "Dr. Nagasawa told me in the most caring way that he was sorry," says Phillips. "I hugged him and told him that with his knowledge, my strength and a little help from above, we'll get through this."

Dr. Nagasawa determined that Phillips had non-small-cell cancer and sent the tumor to a laboratory for DNA analysis, which identified certain mutations in the tumor. "Jeff was fortunate in that his tumor expressed a certain type of cancer that is particularly responsive to a new class of drugs called immunotherapy, which uses the patient's own immune system to identify and destroy a cancerous tumor," says Dr. Nagasawa. Phillips began receiving immunotherapy treatments once every three weeks. "From day one, I was so lucky that Dr. Nagasawa was caring for me," Phillips says. "I knew I had cancer, but I was so well taken care of by everyone that after a while I didn't think of it that way. I'm really lucky."

At the Judi and Bill Leonard Institute for Cancer Prevention, Treatment and Wellness at Providence Mission Hospital, we bring together the expertise of premier cancer specialists and patient navigators, as well as access to the most advanced technology and treatment options. "We have the newest diagnostic and PET scanning ability, and genetic testing to identify patients who are at high risk for developing cancer in the future," says Dr. Nagasawa. "We also undertake innovative research through clinical trials, so patients have access to new drugs and other therapies that are not available to the general public."

To increase his physical strength and combat fatigue, Phillips made a commitment to hiking. He had always enjoyed walking, but now he was passionate. He took hikes in the morning before he went to his job as a purchasing agent. He'd also walk at lunchtime with co-workers and walk again after work. "My mission was to walk as long as I could to stay ahead of this cancer," he says.

And stay ahead he did. His first scan showed that the tumors in his stomach, lungs and lymph nodes had shrunk by half, inspiring him to add more miles to his daily routine.

A few months later, Phillips's progress was stalled when a PET scan showed that the tumor in his lung had grown, so he received radiation treatments from radiation oncologist

Did you know that lung cancer, in its early stages, may not have any signs or symptoms?

That makes regular screening for high-risk individuals an important part of detection and treatment of early-stage lung cancers. If you are a current or former smoker and at least age 50, talk to your primary care provider about low-dose CT lung cancer screening or contact patient navigator Christine Reilly at 949-573-9492 ext. 4065 or christine.reilly@stjoe.org.

William Chou, MD, at the Leonard Cancer Institute. Then, in July 2020, Ming Li, MD, who became Phillips's oncologist after Dr. Nagasawa had retired in 2019, called Phillips with the news: His cancer was in remission, and he showed "no evidence of disease."

Today, Phillips, 55, lives in Rancho Santa Margarita with his wife, Valerie, and daughter, Victoria. He not only continues to be cancer-free but was an inspirational speaker at the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life, where he thanked everyone on the Leonard Cancer Institute's oncology team, including Dr. Chou, Dr. Li, Dr. Nagasawa and Jade Haines, RN.

"Jeff was inspiring to me, too," says Dr. Nagasawa, "not just by how well he did with his treatments, but with his positive attitude, bravery and fortitude. He's just an amazing person."

In the three-plus years since he was diagnosed, Phillips has become active in the group Man Up To Cancer to inspire men to connect and avoid isolation throughout their cancer journeys. He has also walked 8,576 miles. And to celebrate his 2020 remission, he and Valerie went to Utah's Zion National Park, where he—although fearful of heights—hiked the treacherous cliffside trail to Angels Landing. "My legs were like jelly, but I had to do this, because I'd just been through the most fearful part of my life," he says. "And I wasn't going to let anything stop me from living." ●