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FABRIZIO COSTANTINI/Detroit Free Press

Jon Imerman, 29, of Birmingham is a survivor of testicular cancer. After undergoing chemotherapy, Imerman now enjoys participating in various sports. Jon founded Imerman Angels, a support program that pairs cancer survivors with those undergoing treatment for cancer.

Survivor leads band of angels

He beat cancer, now he helps others cope with treatment

By LAURA POTTIS
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Jon Imerman wishes someone could have offered a personal account of how chemotherapy would feel, how long the nausea and fatigue would last and what else he could anticipate as he underwent treatment for testicular cancer.

"The hardest part, for most people, is the beginning," said Imerman, 29, a Birmingham resident who was diagnosed in October 2001. "Those insider-type feelings and advice is really what

makes a difference." Imerman's three older brothers, parents and friends formed what he called "a cheering section" during his treatment, and he read everything he could find on testicular cancer. But, throughout his chemotherapy at Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute in Detroit, Imerman noticed other patients who were struggling without the kind of support that surrounded him. "I noticed how so many people were sitting there having chemo dripped into their veins, completely alone for six hours," he

said. "It was something I thought about through the whole fight." So when his cancer went into remission in December 2003, he formed Imerman Angels to connect cancer survivors with those who are fighting the disease. To date, he has 17 survivors ready to offer advice and assistance, and a handful of patients he has personally helped or matched with other survivors. Those who have had cancer are "uniquely aware of the situation and can relate every step of the way," Imerman said. Through Imerman Angels, he

hopes to match fighters with survivors of the same gender, age group and cancer type. The survivors are volunteers who can do anything from answer questions and listen, to attend treatment sessions and doctor visits, he said. Statistics show there is a need. Of the estimated 1.3 million new cases of cancer in the United States last year, 47,400 were from Michigan, according to data from the American Cancer Society. To find local survivors and fighters, Imerman sent countless e-mails to friends and acquaint-

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ances, visited the chemotherapy treatment center at Karmanos and talked to doctors and nurses who work with cancer patients. With the help of friends, he is trying to spread the word through a Web site, business cards, T-shirts and bumper stickers.

Marilyn Megdell, a family friend of Imerman, recently learned about his efforts and volunteered to help. When she was treated for breast cancer eight years ago, she said a friend who also had confronted the disease offered her practical advice "that you don't get from a book." She hopes to give back what she learned to others who are going through cancer treatment.

"I want to be positive, but I don't want to be a Pollyanna. You're allowed to cry and feel sad," said Megdell, 57, of Waterford. "But if I can add some sense of positive energy, then it's my pleasure to do it."

Imerman said he has a family history of cancer, but when he was diagnosed at age 26, "it was out of the blue." The Cranbrook and University of Michigan grad had moved to downtown Birmingham and was starting a career in commercial real estate, and was busy with sports and his childhood and college buddies.

"As the typical, idiot guy, you think you're invincible. The last thing you think is cancer," he said.

During his first bout of pain, he was misdiagnosed, but received the news days later when he visited a urologist. He was scheduled for surgery the next day to remove a tumor, and soon after

began months of chemotherapy. Still, even with a doctor he praises and the boundless encouragement of family and friends, he didn't have answers to things such as how to get rid of the metallic taste caused by the chemotherapy.

With so many people affected by the disease, it's good to have more awareness of groups to help those who are dealing with cancer, said Joe Perry, program director for Gilda's Club-Metro Detroit, which provides support services for cancer patients and their loved ones.

"You want to hear those success stories, especially when you're first diagnosed. Nobody can kind of give you that encouragement like somebody who's gone through it and come out the other side," Perry said. "I think that's a very powerful relationship or exchange that you can have with somebody."

Dr. Maha Hussain, a University of Michigan professor of medicine and urology, who treated Imerman, said Imerman's efforts offer "an important resource."

"The availability of an emotional support to a patient is extremely important," Hussain said.

Each day, Imerman talks to or visits two metro Detroit men fighting cancer, answering any questions about their concerns and what they can expect. He has linked the mothers of two teenaged boys fighting cancer and also has survivors of several forms of cancer waiting to help. Additionally, he said survivors in Washington, D.C., and Chicago are available by phone, but he hopes to find more patients looking for assistance from those who

have overcome the disease. "I'm lucky to be alive and I want to help people. It's such an easy thing for me to do," Imerman said. "To know you're not alone, that you do become strong

again and go on, it gives me more oomph." For more information about Imerman Angels, call 248-593-9888

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