

Randy (center) with his fellow firefighters at the Pittsburgh Fire Bureau Station 6 in Lawrenceville.



Fighting More Than Just Fire

Each week, 32-year-old Randy Meyer completes several 24-hour shifts, answering 10 to 20 calls a day from the firehouse in Lawrenceville where he's stationed. The physical demands are tough. But he says, "It's just part of who I am." Randy has been a firefighter for almost 10 years. Responding to accidents and fires, medical emergencies, water rescues, and people trapped in buildings, he's seen it all. But just five years ago, his passion nearly came to a tragic end.

What started as minor indigestion and pain after eating, first diagnosed as acid reflux, turned out to be a rare cancer called pseudomyxoma peritonei, or PMP, which starts as a tumor in the appendix. As the tumor grows, it spreads to the abdomen where more tumors form and make a jelly-like substance. This eventually fills up the abdomen and can push on internal organs, sometimes blocking the intestines or causing them to fail, all with devastating results.

David L. Bartlett, MD
Surgical Oncologist



A PLAN OF ATTACK

Randy needed to act quickly. He found his way to David L. Bartlett, MD, vice chairman of surgical oncology and gastrointestinal services at UPMC. After looking at Randy's CT scan, Dr. Bartlett wanted to start treatment immediately. "Randy's cancer was very invasive. We had to have a plan of attack and treat his condition very aggressively," says Dr. Bartlett, who sees patients at UPMC CancerCenter, which in partnership with the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, is the region's only Comprehensive Cancer Center as designated by the National Cancer Institute.

Within a week, Randy was in the operating room. Dr. Bartlett and his team began the task of removing the tumors growing inside Randy's abdomen. The procedure, called HIPEC, is something Dr. Bartlett has done more than 1,000 times, and takes up to 17 hours to complete. During the procedure, the abdomen is opened and the tumors are removed. Then, because the tumor cells are more vulnerable to high temperatures than normal cells, chemotherapy heated to 107 degrees Fahrenheit is circulated throughout the abdomen. Medical staff rock the patient back and forth, ensuring the cancer-killing drug reaches every possible area of the abdomen. Then the team suctions out the drug, closes the wound, and the surgery is over.

Randy's recovery took several months. But even after surgery, he was not out of danger. Because his cancer was so aggressive, more tumors appeared, and he needed the same surgery again 14 months later. A new round of IV chemotherapy followed, and then a third surgery. This time, it was to remove tumors that had spread to his lungs and diaphragm. "I definitely went through the gauntlet," Randy says. "But after my last surgery, Dr. Bartlett told me he removed mostly all of the cancer, and I couldn't have been happier." Due to the complexity and nature of the cancer, there are still several small traces left, which are being monitored by Dr. Bartlett.



"She helped me get through those tough times where I didn't know what was going to happen next."

Randy with his wife, Stephanie.

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

Six months after the last surgery, feeling healthy for the first time in years, Randy went back to work. He says his fellow firefighters are like family, and they kept in touch throughout his ordeal. When Randy was too sick to work, someone always covered his shift, making sure that he never missed a paycheck. "I can't thank these guys enough," he says. "They're all like my brothers."

Randy also was able to marry his longtime girlfriend, Stephanie. "She's my everything," he says with a smile. "She helped me get through those tough times where I didn't know what was going to happen next. And by the grace of God and support of our family, we were able to have the wedding of our dreams." Randy and Stephanie have embraced the concept of living each day to the fullest and have been traveling the world. "We're just so happy that everything turned out the way it did," says Stephanie. "I'm looking forward to what comes next for us."