Makiki man active in fight against cancer

Phil Olsen began a support group for men during his ongoing battle with prostate cancer

By Nina Wu - Honolulu Star Advertiser

When Phil Olsen of Makiki was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1989, the future seemed dire.

He underwent several painful biopsies to pinpoint the location of the tumor in his prostate, a walnut-size gland below the bladder. He was given the option of orchiectomy, or the surgical removal of his testes, but said no thanks.
At the time, he was working as a corporate pilot for Alexander & Baldwin.

Three years after the diagnosis, Olsen learned the cancer had spread to his bones. His doctor advised him to get his affairs in order.

"I saw the Grim Reaper," he said.

Prostate cancer is second only to lung cancer as a leading cause of cancer-related deaths among men in the U.S., according to the American Cancer Society. It is one of the top five cancers that kill males in Hawaii, according to the University of Hawaii Cancer Center, which estimates about 800 cases of invasive prostate cancer are diagnosed in the state each year.

But Olsen, 83, has beaten the odds.

The former UH administrator and retired flight instructor is not only managing to live with cancer, but is proactively battling it on numerous fronts — not the least of which was a $25,000 donation last week to the UH Cancer Center for prostate cancer research.

"I really am impressed with the potential of the university having a cancer center that becomes a true star performer in research, treatment and prevention of all cancers," he said. "I think we're within striking distance of coming up with some solid cures and preventions."

The center brought Charles Rosser, former chief of urologic oncology at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Orlando, Fla., on as a research program director in January, a move Olsen sees as important in creating a comprehensive cancer research center in Hawaii.

When it came to choosing a path of treatment for his cancer, Olsen took the route less traveled.

He chose not to undergo surgery or chemotherapy. Instead, he went through external beam radiation for about a year, followed by androgen deprivation therapy to reduce male hormone levels, which he continues today. Olsen also sought second opinions, eventually receiving treatment from a prostate cancer specialist in Marine Del Ray, Calif.

"I think we've got to keep pushing the envelope," he said. "We've got to question the status quo and make new options where they don't exist."
The former marathon runner took up meditation and continued exercising. When he could no longer run, he walked.

Today he walks about four miles several times a week, sometimes accompanied by a friend. Among his companions are cardiologist and Honolulu Marathon founder Jack Scaff, who first detected Olsen's abnormal prostate during a routine exam.

To help others facing prostate cancer, Olsen in 2005 founded the Hawaii Prostate Cancer Coalition, a nonprofit advocacy and support group linked to a national organization. He said he used support groups for women with breast cancer as a model for the organization. Men tend to keep their cancer to themselves but would benefit from sharing, according to Olsen.

"They need to talk about it because that's the only way to gain any wisdom about the nature of their disease," he said. "It's a very complex disease, and, furthermore, it's of great value to men's families and loved ones. We welcome them to the support groups."

Recently, Olsen underwent a scan at the Queen's Medical Center with a state-of-the-art imaging tool, the 3 Tesla MRI, to monitor his health and is inspired by the medical technology available today. In his battle against cancer, he has never given up hope.

"We've come a long way," he said. "I hope it leads to more people following suit and contributing not only their time and efforts, but also their financial support in a successful battle against prostate cancer."