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'Judicial warrior' fights his toughest opponent

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LAWRENCE -- Two years ago, Judge Michael T. Stella Jr. stopped perming his hair and grew a beard in an effort to change his appearance.

Today, he sports a close-cropped peach fuzz and a clean-shaven face.



Judge Michael T. Stella Jr. is back in his office after being away a month for cancer surgery.

But the presiding judge of Lawrence District Court isn't striving for a more judicious look this time. The makeover is a result of his six-month battle with cancer that continues as he begins radiation therapy.

The judge credits his friends and family for helping him through the ordeal, though colleagues say it is Judge Stella's own indefatigable spirit that guided him. Despite chemotherapy and painful surgery to remove a lung, Judge Stella works almost daily and sometimes on weekends.

"He's been a warrior," said Lawrence District Court Judge Allan J. Jarasitis, a friend of Judge Stella. "He's a fighter just like he is in the courthouse and on the bench."

Sitting in his corner office on the third floor of Lawrence District Court, Judge Stella, 56, appeared vibrant. His beardless cheeks were rosy. His hazel eyes were bright. He said he never knew how much he loved his job until his illness kept him home for a month.

Perhaps the most telling indication of how he feels is the fact Judge Stella scheduled himself to sit on the bench this week, though he admits it may be too early, yet. His fight is not over.

It all began last February when he felt a pain in his ribs and began to wheeze.

He visited the doctor, who told the judge he had pneumonia and pleurisy, inflammation of the rib cage. X-rays revealed a tumor about the size of a peach pit. The tumor was attached to the outside of his left lung. The edges of the mass had spread like fingers, attaching themselves to his rib cage.

On March 21, Judge Stella found out the tumor was cancerous.

"It was like getting hit by a steamroller," he said.

His first thoughts were of his wife, Barbara, whom he married 33 years ago, and his mother, Mary, 85. He visited a priest.

"I never said 'Why me?' I figured that's the way the cards are dealt," he said.

Judge Stella doesn't know how he got the cancer. He stopped smoking in his 20s and he has never been exposed to asbestos.

He put his energy into fighting the cancer. He underwent three chemotherapy treatments to shrink the tumor. One day he pinched his chin and a clump of hair came out between his fingers. He swept his hand through his head, and more hair fell out. The next day, a barber shaved his head and beard.

"I don't want people to look at me and think I was a cancer patient," he said.

Then, on July 6, a nationally-known Boston surgeon removed two lobes of his left lung. The surgery required a 16-inch incision starting just under Judge Stella's left breast and ending on his back. One rib was removed, which Judge Stella said was the most painful part of the recovery.

The surgeon, Dr. David Sugarbaker, of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Dana Farber Cancer Institute, is a pioneer in the treatment of a rare cancer caused by exposure to asbestos.

Judge Stella was home recovering for a month. Judge Jarasitis lunched with him several times a week to arrange court schedules and to bring him papers to sign.

Lawyers said the courthouse hasn't run as smoothly since Judge Stella fell ill.

Defense lawyer Thomas J. Tortisi said Judge Stella made one of the busiest courthouses in the state into one of the most efficiently run courthouses.

During his illness, more than a dozen traveling judges sat at the courthouse while Judge Jarasitis and Judge Ellen Flatley, both assigned to Lawrence, and Judge Stephen S. Ostrach took on more duties.

Judge Stella has started undergoing radiation and chemotherapy to make sure all the cancer cells are killed. He will have radiation five days a week for four weeks.

"If spirit is what carries you through this, I think he's going to do great," said Murat Erkan, an assistant district attorney at Lawrence District Court.

Judge Stella said he is getting stronger every day and is confident he will recover. And, as his hair grows back, there is one positive note.

"I have more hair than I ever had before," he said.

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