

Ken Laney: How a skin cancer diagnosis led to a more “grateful” life

When you receive a cancer diagnosis, “grateful” typically isn’t the first word that comes to mind, but for Ken Laney, 66, the sentiment has been an integral theme throughout his cancer journey.

A native of Florida, Ken spent many long days at the beach getting burned by the sun. He and his wife Terri moved from Florida to Texas in 2006. A father to three (now adult) children, Ken is the pastor at Live Oak Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas, just northwest of Austin. He’s had many encounters with congregants who were diagnosed with cancer, but when his daughter pointed out an unusual looking spot on his ankle, his family never imagined Ken would be diagnosed with a superficial spreading and nodular melanoma.

‘It stopped me in my tracks’

Ken visited his primary care doctor about the spot on his ankle in 2020. Originally, they thought it was eczema and prescribed a topical cream. However, the spot didn’t go away, so he was referred to a dermatologist. By January 2021, it was more raised and scabbed.

“The dermatologist’s initial impression was not of immediate concern because the spot did not look like a typical melanoma,” said Ken. To be safe the doctor took a biopsy. After a week, the



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results came back, and Ken’s life was changed. “It stopped me in my tracks.”

The very next day, his dermatologist referred him to a surgical oncologist in Central Austin with Texas Oncology Surgical Specialists. Ken was immediately scheduled to Christopher R. Oxner, M.D., FACS, USN, who has a special interest in skin-related malignancies.

‘I wanted it gone’

Being diagnosed with cancer in the middle of a pandemic created some unique challenges.

“You want someone walking right alongside you, which for me, is my wife,” said Ken. Due to hospital restrictions, she couldn’t be by his side during his appointments, but he was able to put his full faith in Dr. Oxner, who gave him the information he needed and answered all his questions.

“I think it’s important to know that skin cancer is the most common form of

cancer, and in many cases, it is easily preventable by limiting exposure to the sun’s harmful rays,” said Dr. Oxner. “Texas ranks third in the nation for newly diagnosed cases of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.”

Following a full examination and definitive diagnosis of melanoma, Dr. Oxner recommended surgery to remove Ken’s cancerous spot.

“I wanted it gone! The sooner the better,” said Ken. Dr. Oxner’s surgical plan also included the removal of a few lymph nodes in Ken’s leg to investigate if the cancer had spread.

“The treatment of melanoma has evolved,” said Dr. Oxner. “We now have various treatment plans that can extend people’s lives and give them time with the ones they love. These advancements have greatly impacted the survival rates and management of melanoma patients, especially in surgical cases.”

‘Blessed to have these men care for me’

Ken’s surgery took place on Feb. 1, 2021. Because the surgical area was approximately the size of a baseball and too deep to simply be sewn back up, Dr. Oxner requested the assistance of a plastic surgeon to help address the large, open wound.

After surgery, Dr. Oxner and the plastic surgeon worked as a team to

monitor Ken and his recovery. As part of his recovery process, Ken was required to wear a vacuum-assisted closure of his wound to decrease air pressure, helping it to heal more quickly.

While Ken was relieved to hear that his lymph nodes were clear and there were no signs of cancer, he also learned that the cancer had spread within the wound. It would require two additional surgeries by Dr. Oxner to remove the cancerous areas.

In March 2021, after receiving an all-clear of any signs of cancer in the wound, Ken saw the plastic surgeon to receive a skin graft to replace the skin that was removed during surgery.

Ken’s surgery and recovery happened in the midst of COVID-19, and Texas was also hit by one of the worst winter storms in recent memory, but it did not shake Ken on his path to recovery. He was really pleased with the care he received.

“I’m very happy with both of my physicians,” he said. “When it comes to your health, that’s what’s important. I’m very blessed to have these men care for me.”

‘So much of life is shallow’

More than one year after his cancer diagnosis and treatment, Ken is doing well. He continues to see Dr. Oxner for checkups, and all tests to check for

the potential spread or recurrence of cancer have been negative.

“As a man of faith, I wasn’t concerned about dying. I was thinking more about my wife and kids,” recalls Ken. “So much of life is shallow. Going through this makes you go deep within. You have to be willing to go there, and you come out on other side with a greater sense of gratitude and knowledge.”

Dr. Oxner says that Ken is taking an active role in his care, making lifestyle changes for prevention and health.

“Ken does his research and brings questions about various treatments and recommendations for his care,” said Dr. Oxner. “His questions challenge me to do more of my own research, and he makes me truly feel that we are treating his cancer as a team.”

‘Advocate for yourself and your health’

The most valuable piece of advice Ken can give to anyone is the importance of advocating for yourself. “If you have a suspicious spot, insist on a biopsy,” he said. “I wish I had pushed harder for that in the beginning.”

He encourages others to force the issue and be better stewards of their health.

When it comes to skin cancer prevention, the most important aspect is sun protection over

the course of a lifetime. Performing monthly skin self-examinations may also help identify changes to the skin. Depending on your age and personal and family history, a skin examination may be conducted as part of your regular health exams.

‘I am grateful’

“The impact of what I’ve gone through won’t slip away easily,” said Ken. “This was a wakeup call and I want to stay awake.”

Ken is grateful for so many things as he looks back on this experience. “Gratitude is important. I’m grateful for the care I received. I’m grateful for the nurses. I’m grateful to have ended up with a good outcome. I am grateful for all that I have,” he said.



Ken Laney shares the importance of gratitude in his journey with melanoma

In Texas, an estimated 4,838 people are expected to be diagnosed with melanoma in 2022, with approximately 555 deaths. For more information about skin cancer, visit [TexasOncology.com](https://www.texasoncology.com).

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