

## Testimony from Gordon Ryder

Gerrit Paul Ryder 11-9-1976 to 3-6-2016

In May 2015, Gerrit felt a lump in his abdomen, had some traveling pains and had difficulty exercising. He went to a chiropractor a few times thinking he had a pulled muscle or pinched nerve.

On Memorial Day 2015, he still managed to do the “murph” in just over an hour.

In June 2015, still having pains, can't sleep on his back. I told him to make an appointment with the VA. He said it was too difficult to get an appointment and he would wait for his July 1<sup>st</sup> annual checkup.

In July 1<sup>st</sup>, the VA doctor was sick and they told him to come back August 15<sup>th</sup> or he could sit and possibly get an appointment the next day. That night at about 8:30 p.m., we found him doubled up in pain on the floor of our house after a big meal. We went to the Opelousas General Hospital emergency room where a scan showed a mass in his abdomen. The ER doctor said it looked like lymphoma. The next day we went to Dr. Gary Blanchard, a relative, to make a game plan. I also called Dr. Brent Prather, Gerrit's doctor when he was a child. He knew Dr. Mark St. Cyr, the VA doctor, and would talk to him about seeing Gerrit. Gerrit saw Dr. St. Cyr at the VA the next day, 7-3-15. He arranged for a PET scan at Our Lady of Lourdes.

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, I went with Gerrit to his appointment with Dr. St. Cyr for the follow up of the can. He was very concerned and thought we had no time to waste. He contacted Alexandria VA to schedule an upper and lower GI test for Gerrit. We went to Alexandria for pre-op the next day, July 8<sup>th</sup>. They were going to schedule it for the following Monday. One of the nurses told us that wasn't enough time, then I showed her Gerrit's CT scan results. After reading it, her whole attitude changed. “Yes,” she said, “we must hurry and get these tests done.”

On July 13<sup>th</sup>, I brought him to Alexandria VA for the tests. After the tests, the doctor, Dr. Dorval, came to talk to me, wanting us to come back in two weeks for an ultrasound. I asked about a biopsy Dr. St. Cyr was trying to schedule. He, in no uncertain terms, informed me he was in charge. The tumor was probably benign and to come back in two weeks for an ultrasound! On the ride home, Gerrit was very aggravated, told me that the doctor wouldn't let him finish explaining his symptoms and what was going on physically with him. Before we go home, approximately a one hour drive, the Lafayette VA called Gerrit. Dr. St. Cyr saw the Alexandria VA results and would schedule a biopsy at Our Lady of Lourdes in Lafayette out of the VA network. We received a call from Lourdes scheduling a biopsy July 17<sup>th</sup>. After the biopsy, he received a call from the Alexandria VA to set up an appointment with the oncologist, Dr. John Clement. Dr. Clement told us that with the lymphoma, Gerrit had a seventy-five percent possibility of cure and a ninety-five percent possibility of remission. Chemo was to start August 3<sup>rd</sup>.

On August 3, 2015, we went to Alexandria, the VA, Gerrit was starting to feel very bad and was having to take a lot of pain medicine. They performed a number of tests, placed a port for chemo treatment on August 4<sup>th</sup>. We were told chemo would start on August 5<sup>th</sup>. The night of August 5<sup>th</sup>, Gerrit told me he had withdrawals from the pain meds, which he quit using because of the constipation it caused. This, in turn, caused very heavy rectal bleeding. Chemo did not start because approval from Little Rock, Arkansas, was needed and treatment could not start because we had not gotten the approval. We are not sure what the hold up in Little Rock was, but we were told it had something to do with somebody having car trouble. Along this time frame, he was given two units of blood. The first cycle of chemo started August 7<sup>th</sup>. We brought Gerrit home August 8<sup>th</sup> and he felt bad all week.

We went back August 13<sup>th</sup> to check the bloodwork and when he checked in, he found out he was mistaken, that his appointment was for the 14<sup>th</sup>. He was feeling so bad, the doctor worked him into the daily schedule. When his bloodwork was returned, they decided to keep him overnight and give him three units of blood, and he felt much better after receiving the blood.

On August 22, 2015, Gerrit's hair began to fall out.

On September 8<sup>th</sup>, second round of chemo. He didn't feel too bad, was still going to college at this time, but he does have a high pain threshold.

On October 9<sup>th</sup>, third round of chemo, everything seemed to be going well.

On November 13<sup>th</sup>, fourth cycle of chemo. The week before treatment has been getting very painful. He is in much discomfort now.

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, he went for the fifth cycle, but his blood count was too low and he was told to return December 18<sup>th</sup>.

On the 18<sup>th</sup>, his blood count was still too low. Now he was to come back December 21<sup>st</sup> to receive more blood, have another scan and possibly bone marrow biopsy.

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, received four units of blood and had a scan.

On December 22<sup>nd</sup>, Gerrit called me in the morning, telling me to come pick him up. The scan showed the tumor was growing. Dr. Clement wanted him to go to Houston, either M.D. Anderson or Houston VA, whoever could see him first because the chemo was not working.

He received a call December 23<sup>rd</sup> from Houston VA, giving him an appointment on December 28<sup>th</sup>. We drove him to Houston VA December 28<sup>th</sup>, approximately a four hour drive from our home, had bloodwork at 11:00 and saw the doctor at 1:30. The doctor was very concerned and told us the Houston VA would try to help him and said if they couldn't help him, they would refer him to M.D. Anderson. He was immediately admitted and assigned a team of doctors to treat him.

From December 28<sup>th</sup> to January 5<sup>th</sup>, there were a lot of tests, biopsies, scans, ultrasounds, many tests. Because this cancer is so aggressive, we were told about a special test that is only done in San Francisco. The doctor said it was very expensive but he thought they would approve it. We never heard any more about this test. They decided to give him what was called “salvage chemo.” We could see the strength draining out of him. We returned home January 5<sup>th</sup> and were told to go back for the second cycle on January 28<sup>th</sup>.

The week before January 28<sup>th</sup>, Gerrit was getting more and more uncomfortable, He doesn't complain much, but I know he is hurting.

Drove to Houston the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. He had a very bad night that night. Upon examining him January 28<sup>th</sup>, they found more tumors. This chemo failed also. They would immediately try to refer him to M.D. Anderson. Drove home the 28<sup>th</sup> and at 8:30 that night, he collapsed in pain again, and we had to go to the Opelousas General emergency room. There, they drained four liters of fluid off of his swollen abdomen.

Started called M.D. Anderson on February 1<sup>st</sup>, but they had no record of Gerrit at that point. I started a referral and gave them all the medical information I had. We were waiting for the VA approval of out-of-network medical care. Called Congressman Abraham's office for help with approval. His office told us the office in North Carolina was the approver and it was forthcoming. Called North Carolina and could not get any answers. Received a call the next day from the North Carolina office because the previous call was monitored. They assured me they would hurry with the approval.

February 5<sup>th</sup>, back to OGH ER to drain abdomen because of discomfort and hard to breathe. Called M.D. Anderson, still nothing from the VA. I was told no appointment would be scheduled until they got the VA approval. While in Opelousas General Hospital, I told Dr. Gary Blanchard I would wait until the next Wednesday for the approval. He said Gerrit might not have until then. I let him rest the next day, and February 8<sup>th</sup>, we got in the care and drove four hours to the M.D. Anderson ER, where they promptly admitted him. The physicians there told us of an experimental treatment but at this time, his blood counts were too low to qualify and they would try some of the previous chemo to see if they could shrink the tumors to give him time for his blood to improve so he would qualify for the experimental treatment. M.D. Anderson installed a chest drain to receive the pressure in his abdomen. The doctor kept asking for the pathology reports and lab slides from the Houston VA. He needed to see the reports before he could start Gerrit's chemo. We had sent permission to Houston VA on January 28<sup>th</sup> to release all medical records. I called and could not get a good answer as to why the records have not been sent yet. Of course, VA approval for treatment had not been sent either. I talked to Dr. Clement at Alexandria VA several times. He was also trying to find where the records were and why they weren't sent. I walked from M.D. Anderson to the Houston VA, approximately a mile and half, went to the pathology department, tracked down the correct person to get the records from, sat with her until she got them together, and hand carried them back to M.D. Anderson. She told me

she could send them over the next day. I told her if it was all the same, my son was dying of cancer at M.D. Anderson and I would just as soon take them myself. All this time, I am watching him get weaker and weaker.

He had the chemo and we returned home February 16<sup>th</sup> from M.D. Anderson. His mother commented, when he returned home February 16<sup>th</sup> from M.D. Anderson, he looked worse than when he left.

We went to Alexandria VA to have his blood checked on either 23<sup>rd</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> of February. It's getting hard for him to walk now, and the fluid is seeping through the skin on his leg and feet. Still no appointment from M.D. Anderson. We keep checking.

On February 27<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Gary Blanchard checked him at home and told us to bring him to the ER at Opelousas General because he was dehydrated.

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, I left for a short trip. Gerrit got progressively worse.

I was called home March 4<sup>th</sup>.

Gerrit passed away in the hospital March 6, 2016, at 2:53 a.m.

I wonder if we had been referred earlier to Houston VA or M.D. Anderson if it would have saved Gerrit. Through this whole process, I got the feeling that veterans are given crumbs, secondhand services, leftovers. At best, the VA moves at a snail's pace; the rest of the world is watching DVD's and they're stuck on cassettes. They like to say, "We'll get back to you in five to seven business days," or "Call back Monday," but cancer and other diseases grow on the weekend and twenty-four hours a day during the week, too. We had a lot of people truly engaged in Gerrit's treatment. I could see the frustration in a lot of them because they weren't given what they were needed to provide for their patients. I wonder if Joe Biden had this much trouble when his son fought cancer. I am a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, Gerrit served eight years in the U.S. Navy, I have another son who was a U.S. Marine. Why can't we and the other veterans get health benefits equal to you people in the U.S. Congress? We served our country, but it is the opinion of a lot of people that all you do is receive from our country.