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Woody: For Jim Kelly, a family effort to battle cancer Paul Woody pwoody@timesdispatch.com

NFL's Jim Kelly

For Jim Kelly, a family effort to battle cancer



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(L-R) Jim Kelly, Dr. Joe Niamtu, Bruce Smith

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Jim Kelly played in four Super Bowls as quarterback for the Buffalo Bills and is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

He has a beautiful family, five brothers who care for him deeply and friends who cherish their relationship with him.

He has experienced life's greatest highs. And he has encountered some of life's most punishing lows.

"Going to four Super Bowls is great," said Pat Kelly, the eldest of the Kelly brothers, a former University of Richmond linebacker and a Richmond-area resident. "Coming up on the short end in all four is devastating.

"His son Hunter was born on Jim's birthday, then Hunter was diagnosed with Krabbe leukodystrophy."

Krabbe leukodystrophy is a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system. Life expectancy for an infant with the disease is 3 years. Hunter died at the age of 8½.

"Jim was a first-ballot Hall of Famer," said Pat, 63 and a member of UR's athletic hall of fame. "Shortly after that, his son passed away.

"Jim has traveled the country, talking to governors to get them to change the number of tests babies have when they're born. Some children die just because they're born in the wrong state. Jim probably has saved thousands of lives.

"Then he was diagnosed with cancer. He's gone from one extreme high to an extreme low. Sometimes you wonder: What does it take?"

Through the best and worst of times, Jim Kelly's family has been by his side — wife Jill, daughters Erin and Camryn, and his five brothers, Pat, Ray, Ed, Dan and Kevin.

The family relies on a deep religious faith.

Ray, 56, also lives in Richmond and played linebacker at UR.

Jim Kelly first came to Richmond because Pat and Ray were here. Ray once found Jim a summer job as a roofer.

"After about two weeks, Jim said, 'Ray, this is not a good job in the summer in Richmond,'" Ray said. "He said, 'You take care of me now, and I promise one day, I'll take care of you.'"

“I said, ‘Done.’ It (roofing) probably wasn’t a good idea anyway.”

And Jim, 54, has made good on his promise, not just to Ray, but to all his brothers and countless others in Buffalo and across the country.

“Who knew he would end up like he did?” Ray said. “We’re not on a payroll or anything, but hunting trips, Super Bowls, Jim takes care of us and a lot of others.”

At one point, Jim Kelly considered relocating to Richmond and had a house built in Chesdin Landing in Chesterfield County.

The timing never was quite right.

Instead, he has come to town to see his brothers and close family friend Dr. Joseph Niamtu.

Kelly has served as the co-host for a fundraiser with Niamtu for Noah’s Children, a pediatric palliative care and hospice program in Central Virginia. He has helped with a fundraiser for the Greater Richmond ARC, which serves children and adults with developmental disabilities.

“Whenever I’ve called and said, ‘You need to co-chair this benefit with me,’ his answer has been, ‘Tell me when I need to be there,’” Niamtu said. “It’s not as if he’s just passing through.”

Niamtu and Kelly share a painful bond. Niamtu has two sons with cerebral palsy.

“When you have a disabled child, your life becomes full of ‘can’t’s’ because there are a million things you and he can’t do,” Niamtu said. “The hurt and pain is hard to understand unless you’ve been there. Jim showed me how to deal with that with strength and dignity. I call on his example a lot.

“He’s going to do the same thing with this.”

“This” is cancer.

Kelly has had a recurrence of cancer he first suffered in his jaw about a year ago. This time, it's even more serious. Some cancers follow nerves, and Kelly's cancer, Niamtu said, has attached itself to the trigeminal nerve in his face.

It is a bad nerve for cancer to follow.

The pain created is so searing it almost is unimaginable. And one of the nerve's three branches leads to the brain.

For now, the cancer is inoperable. It's deeper, more widespread than first thought and too close to Kelly's carotid artery.

Kelly is in Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. Radiation treatment for five days each week began Monday. Chemotherapy began Wednesday.

After seven weeks, he'll have a break before the next course of treatment is determined.

Every week, at least one brother visits New York to help Jim and Jill.

Donald Trump and the NFL help by providing housing for the family.

Jim never is out of his brothers' thoughts.

"Not a minute of the day goes by that I don't think about Jim," Pat said.

A month ago, Ray, who retired from Phillip Morris after 34 years, drove to Buffalo, uncertain of what to say or how he would react. He just knew he had to be there.

"I walked into his house wearing a big, blond, curly wig," Ray said. "I don't know if I wore it more to help him or help me."

The Kelly family is certain Jim will fight this with typical Kelly toughness.

"I remember when he was at Miami, and they played at Virginia Tech," Pat said. "He tore up his shoulder that day. I was in the locker room and the doctors were telling him he'd never play football again. He said, 'We'll see about that.'"

“He’s the toughest guy I’ve ever met. If anybody can beat this, it’s Jim.”