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Stuart Summerhayes refuses to let cancer slow him down: 'I would rather live a full life'

BY KEVIN SWAYZE, RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — Stuart Summerhayes knows he can't win his last race, but he won't let cancer set the pace.

Saturday, the champion race walker will conduct an orchestra for the first time. June 19, he plans to join hundreds of other knitters trying to set a world record at Cambridge city hall. June 23, he'll go for a walk in high heel shoes for the first time in a fundraiser for the YWCA of Cambridge.

In August he's determined to attend his stepson's wedding in Toronto.

"I think you have to make things happen, and you have to decide to have things you have to do," said Summerhayes, 76.

"I don't sit down and think a lot about it. I know it's there. I've accepted the fact my life term is limited. I'm just getting on with things and doing what I want."

A longtime arts supporter, he helps his wife, Jill, promote the Cambridge Community Orchestra. In February, he entered a fundraising draw with a grand prize of a guest conductor spot in an upcoming show.

Feb. 23, four days after his name was drawn, he was diagnosed with advanced colon and liver cancer.

In his 30s, Summerhayes looked at his growing belly and decided to get fit. After a mediocre running career, he took up race walking at age 55. Medals started filling his house after he won international meets and set 26 Canadian records in masters rankings.

He said nothing with his health was amiss until his race times started slipping last summer. Slim and wiry, he remembers his doctor's astonishment after blood tests discovered cancer after his annual physical exam.

"Nobody could figure out why it didn't show up before in blood tests, how it had spread so far, so fast," Summerhayes said.

By April, he was enduring brutal chemotherapy to blunt the spreading disease. After his second round of treatments — even at reduced dosage — Summerhayes said no more.

"I was still walking around like a zombie," he said.

"I decided to end it, that I would rather live a full life half as long, not half a life twice as long."

Summerhayes takes no medication now, but visits his doctor monthly for checkups. To help his body battle the cancer, he's now taking protein supplements daily — something he never did when training for races.

As strength returned after chemotherapy, he resumed work on the city's cultural advisory committee and started preparing for his four minutes leading the orchestra.

Summerhayes doesn't read music, but he knows the music well. He's always been a fan of Mozart's *La ci darem la Mano*, from the opera *Don Giovanni*.

Several times daily, he plays a CD of the music in his living room, picks up his baton and practices until his shoulder aches.

"Some people say it's been like therapy for me," Summerhayes said.

With overwhelming support from friends and family over the last few months, he expects he'll step in front of a packed house in the 1,300-seat sanctuary in Forward Baptist Church. The more the better, he said, because that means more people to fill donation jars for the non-profit organization.

Jill Summerhayes remembers the news of cancer was devastating for her.

"I'm much more like Stuart now. We're getting sensible and practical about it," she said.

"I had someone say 'you're so calm getting on with everything as you always did.'

"My analogy is: you see a duck just floating along, but he's paddling along like hell underneath."

While Stuart Summerhayes is determined to control his life, the cancer did kill one important event for the couple. Before diagnosis, he booked a plane trip to his native England. After cancer, he had to cancel because there was no way he could get travel medical insurance.

He hasn't been told how long he has to live. Not that he's worried about it.

"I hear about people who are told they have nine months to live and five years later they're still around because that's what they decided to do," Summerhayes said.

"I just keep on with life, as though nothing went wrong. I want to go on as long as I possibly can. I hope the end comes swiftly and that's it."



Mathew McCarthy/Waterloo Region Record
Stuart Summerhayes practices conducting in his Cambridge home, Thursday. Summerhayes won an auction to conduct the Cambridge Community Orchestra then just four days before being diagnosed with terminal cancer.

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