

Elder Maxwell recounts blessings

Battle against cancer brings 'sharper focus'

By Lynn Arave

Deseret News staff writer

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve appears to be recovering nicely from leukemia.

But contrary to what many people may suspect, he considers his cancerous disease to be more of a blessing than anything else.

Speaking at the annual National Cancer Survivors Day for Utah at Hogle Zoo Saturday, he said one of the blessings of cancer is that it can help a person sort out the big things from the little things in life.

"We have a different perspective, a sharper focus," he said about cancer patients. "I've been given by the Lord a delay en route."

Elder Maxwell, 72, said hair is one of those things that doesn't seem as important after suffering from cancer. A lov-



CHUCK WING, DESERET NEWS

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, his hair covered by a baseball cap, greets people at the zoo.

ing conversation with your family, however, ends up seeming very critical.

He was diagnosed with leukemia three years ago. It was caught fairly early but was progressing very rapidly. He had multiple chemotherapies and ended up

spending 46 days in the hospital.

Elder Maxwell was only able to work part time in his church duties until 10 months ago when he regained his

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strength and returned to full-time status.

"I feel much better now," he said.

He's still receiving some chemotherapy but remains very hopeful.

"Each of us faces an eventual exit route," he said of life.

Elder Maxwell said quite a number of general authorities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been stricken with cancer, including President Spencer W. Kimball, Elder Bruce R. McConkie and President Howard W. Hunter.

"There's no immunity from suffering," he said of church leaders. "Only variation from suffering. How we handle it is the key."

He's especially thankful for the special care his wife, Colleen, whom he describes as a "Florence Nightingale," provided him.

Elder Maxwell said leukemia also has given him a much greater appreciation of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Another blessing he made reference to from his illness was a better capacity to receive help from others.

"We must learn to receive," he said.

He said he also has a greater respect for the doctors and nurses who deal with cancer patients on a daily basis. He credited the advances of medical science for also helping more cancer patients recover.

"I'm wiser by the experience," he said.

The church leader advised cancer patients against wondering why me and why now? He urged patients not to allow tomorrow to overhang today and to continue to avoid self-pity.

He had told the organizers of the event that he wasn't looking for any special treatment or recognition there. He was just glad to attend such an event where special kinship can be felt.

"I draw from their fellowship," he said.

Indeed, he was not dressed in the usual suit and tie apparel of the general authority, but rather a jacket, T-shirt and casual pants.

He even carried and sometimes wore a baseball cap.

Heidi Lindsay, a 19-year-old with Hodgkin's disease, said the toughest thing she's had to learn is letting other people help her.

"A positive attitude will get you through anything" she said.

Doug Bates, another survivor, said he believes cancer is actually harder on the people that care about us than anyone else.

"I know how I feel on a given day. My wife doesn't," said the attorney for the State Office of Education. "She worries. . . I'd rather be the patient than the caregiver."

Cancer survivors were given a free admission day at the zoo Saturday, plus a picnic lunch and a chance to attend a Salt Lake Buzz baseball game in the evening.

Event organizers also are planning another hike to Kings Peak, plus a tram ride to Hidden Peak in July, as well as a candlelight vigil Sept. 25.

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