



# What's Next?

## *A Search for Hope*

An inspiring story about gospel singer, George David Priest, and his triumphant journey through life and over death. George dealt with the diagnosis of terminal malignant melanoma with faith, hope, and love. The team of palliative care and health care providers, his family, and his faith in God supported George through to the end of life's journey.

Second Edition

Dr. Bonnie Clark Douglass, Ed. D.

*What's Next?*  
*A Search for Hope*

*by Dr. Bonnie Clark Douglass, Ed.D.*



Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

Copyright © 2012

All rights reserved — Dr. Bonnie Clark Douglass, Ed.D.  
No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Strategic Book Publishing  
An imprint of Strategic Book Group  
P.O. Box 333  
Durham, CT 06422  
[www.StrategicBookGroup.com](http://www.StrategicBookGroup.com)

ISBN: 978-1-62212-655-2

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design: Peggy Ann Rupp, [www.netdbs.com](http://www.netdbs.com)

Book Design: D. Johnson, Dedicated Business Solutions, Inc.

To contact the author e-mail [elmcroft@hotmail.ca](mailto:elmcroft@hotmail.ca)

## *Dedication*

This book is being dedicated to our families, relatives, and friends who helped us along the way. Especially, Pastor Terry and Addie McAllister and Open Door Fellowship Congregation. Pastor Terry listened to that still small voice of God, which allowed George the opportunity of completing his mission in the final journey of his life. George and Pat Wright, Andy Sadler, Ethel and Roy Bannister, and Graeme Hanson—we include you in this dedication and thank you for opening your hearts and homes for George and I. This allowed us to have a solid foundation in the end-of-life journey.

George and I also wanted to dedicate this book to Dr. John Seely, along with all palliative care units, hospice physicians, and health care workers, as well as Pastor Joe Beesley, who provided, and continues to provide, spiritual guidance.

To the families and people who have been diagnosed with malignant melanoma, or another terminal illness, let this book bring HOPE.

Thank you and God bless,

Bonnie

## *Acknowledgments*

First and foremost, I want to thank my late husband, George, for loving me unconditionally. Special thanks to my children and family, as well as my sisters and brothers, whose support through George's illness and whose continuous encouragement and love have helped me so much. I would like to express appreciation to my mother, Dorothy, for her love and teaching me to "let go." To my special friends, Sheila Cheevers, Joan Manzer, Betty Jones, along with Grant and Sally Healy, who have been there all these years.

A special thanks and appreciation goes to the late Dr. G. E. Chalmers, who was my mentor and motivator for many years. His unwavering love and belief in me allows me to focus on my purpose in life and to follow the vision that has been set before me.

Thank you to my "higher power", whom I choose to call God, whose love and direction helps me stay connected to the most important thing in life—the spiritual journey of finding a higher purpose and sharing the experience with others.

Last, but definitely not the least, my sincere appreciation is expressed to Heather Slowski and Jen Myshra for their individual gifts of friendship and expertise, which put a lamp under my feet, and with whose help and unwavering support I was able to complete *What's Next?—A Search for Hope*. I would like to thank staff at Strategic Publishing for all their help.

Gratitude is expressed to Positive Heart Living  
for assisting with costs to publish the book.

## *Preface*

Thanks to the recordings George and I made, I was able to piece together conversations we had during his terminal illness and treatment of malignant melanoma. Very slight grammatical changes, and deletion of some personal conversations and redundancies have been made to line up with the message George and I wanted to share. Owing to her expertise with grief and the grief cycle, I have cited the late Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a renowned physician and psychiatrist, throughout. While there are varying opinions about the grief cycle and how it pertains to individuals, I fully support the research done by Dr. Kübler-Ross. I have found through personal experience that the ability to move through the grief cycle is directly related to resolving childhood issues, trauma, and other losses in one's life. This book can be used as an educational resource for health-care professionals, and also offer hope for anyone who is dealing with a terminal illness of a loved one.

## *Introduction*

This book is the result of a promise I made to my husband, George, that as long as I was alive he would never be forgotten. Also, I want the general public to be more aware of malignant melanoma, a serious but easily overlooked form of skin cancer, and to know the appropriate medical interventions and preventive measures. It is my hope that health-care professionals will understand the importance and value of their role and care for a person diagnosed with a terminal illness after reading George's story.

The ideas, opinions, research, and perceptions are solely those of George and me, and do not reflect the insights or approval from the medical practitioners or people discussed in our story.

# *Chapter 1*

Our journey through George's illness has been paved with angels, experts, friends, family, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom shed some radiance on the often dimly lighted and narrow path towards our final destination on earth: death. My husband, George, and I knew that when you have done all, then stand; in other words, wait on the Lord when there is nothing left to do. It is then that one knows the last mile to His kingdom is paved with love and compassion beyond belief, and the reality of God's grace is so close that when your loved one departs on eagles' wings, escorted by angels, you can feel the gentleness of the final departure. The door was opened for George to go through the tunnel of death to reach for an unseen hand that guided him home. I felt his last breaths. They were so gentle—like a feather, like an eagle soaring gently into the sky. I wanted to scream and give him oxygen and say, "Don't go," but I knew that I was powerless over the "bigger" plan of God.

A door is closed for those of us left here to grieve the loss of our loved one. Knowing we will see them again does not allow us to escape the pain of grief and the loss if we are to move forward and come to an acceptance of the loss.

Intimacy and flowing communication between a husband and wife are paramount in a healthy relationship. When sickness enters the relationship, everything changes. I was praying for a way to keep our communication open because we talked about little else other than hospitals and tests after January 2007, when George almost died due to the spread of the melanoma into his brain. After prayer and lots of meditation, an answer came: "Write a book". I asked George if he would like us to write a book about our journey and he said, "Yes, I think that is a good idea and I would like to do that". I was amazed that his mind was as sharp as it was after all the treatment and medication.

## 2 *Bonnie Clark Douglass*

George and I wanted to fill the void in our lives as the illness began to consume our jobs, where we were living, our date nights, and our special times together. Our lives were dominated by all the time spent at hospitals for tests, radiation, consults, and traveling. *What's Next? A Search for Hope* is a compilation of conversations, medical reports, memories, and the process in various stages and areas of grief in our lives during the diagnosis, treatment, and issues surrounding the disease of malignant melanoma.

We began the book together, each for different reasons. George wanted to make sure people understood the seriousness of a mole “unattended.” Initially, I just wanted to maintain some form of communication with my husband in the final stages of his illness. We both wanted to give hope to others. According to Helsing, “cutaneous malignant melanoma is the cancer showing the highest rate of increase in Europe” (p. 1). While this is a morbid diagnosis from a medical perspective, I would like to point individuals to a book written by Grant (n.d.), *How I Survived Melanoma*, to offer hope for anyone who has been diagnosed with malignant melanoma. I would also like to state that the Ottawa General Hospital in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is excellent in the treatment, team approach, and offering hope for patients who have been given a terminal diagnosis of this disease. As people, we are entitled to our integrity and, through this journey, I have found that a doctor should never give up on a patient until the patient has come to the final acceptance that death is imminent.

In this book, the story is told about how George and I met, and his journey back to his locus of control (or center) and God. I will be using Kübler-Ross’ research on death and dying as a reference, which parallels to the various stages of the illness and how we both moved through the process—sometimes together, and other times in separate places. At one stage, I may have been in anger and George was in denial, or perhaps we were both in the testing stage of grief. We did everything we could to fight this disease together, but our

emotions and feelings were different at different times and in the various stages of the illness. Sometimes I could only move with the issue at hand, as George was dealing with the increasing pain and spread of the disease in his body.

I began the actual writing of *What's Next? A Search for Hope* when George was in palliative care at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital in New Brunswick in April 2007. George loved the sound of me on the computer, and I had set up my laptop in our room. I knew this was what George wanted, and that it meant I was moving forward. He loved me so much and I knew it; what a gift, and I loved him, and he knew it. Perhaps that is why we fought so hard to prevent the ultimate ending to our story.

While George and I wanted to share our medical and spiritual journey, we also wanted other people to learn about malignant melanoma, as prevention is a key. If malignant melanoma is not diagnosed and treated properly, according to the doctors we worked with, it can lead to terminal illness. Working in the field of cardiology for over two decades, I had seen many cancer patients, including those with skin cancer. I had never worked on anyone with malignant melanoma, and did not realize the seriousness of the disease until it was too late. Physicians need to be clear and concise about the management, treatment, and prognosis once the initial diagnosis is given.

A renowned specialist in melanoma research and oncology physician, Dr. Shail Verma, who became George's personal medical oncologist, explained that this type of cancer was often a direct result of exposure to the sun, that it was hereditary, and that it was common in people with a Scottish ancestry and fair skin. George had these characteristics. His mother and cousin continue to battle the disease, in which metastasis has not yet occurred.

It has been shown in research that the sun and sun beds can contribute to malignant melanoma. Researcher Helsing (1997) contended, "Epidemiological studies which show that the development of melanoma is influenced by both consti-

tutional and behavioral factors. Constitutional factors, such as inheritance, congenital nevi, atypical moles and hormone, and behavioral factors, with the emphasis on exposure to sun” (p. 1) are discussed in the research.

George and I found a soul mate in each other, after years of “life’s lessons” and undoing the bondage of religion from our lives. I will intermingle the conversations we began in late January 2007, as it relates to the progression of the disease and our lives together. First, I would like to introduce you to George, from my own perspective and through our conversations. I would also like people to understand that melanoma is not something that just appeared on George. While this could be the case, this was a mole that was there for years, and just changed in size and shape over time. When I first got to really know George and inquired about the size of the mole, I would tease him that it must be his beauty mark. After all, how could a mole on someone’s neck of that size not be detected?

**BONNIE:** Was there a reason you never had your mole looked at, when your mother kept telling you [over the years] that you should get it looked at?

**GEORGE:** No, not really. I just put it off. Sometimes I am the world’s greatest procrastinator, so I just kept putting it off and putting it off. I thought, “Oh, someday I’ll get it looked at”. Then one day, when it bothered me, I had it looked at.

**BONNIE:** Who are you, anyway?

**GEORGE:** Who am I? My name is George David Priest. I was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, on July 31, 1955, to Raymond and Laura Priest, on a Sunday. It’s been a long journey since then.

**BONNIE:** What did your father do?

**GEORGE:** My father was a minister, the pastor of a church in a little place called Temperance Vale. That’s where I grew up. A little country place, no wider than a hollow you could spit across. We never had running

water until I was—well, I'm not sure how old. My dad would say we did, because we would have to run and get it. We never had indoor plumbing for years. No black-top road; it was a gravel road that we lived on. But we were quite happy and content as kids; we knew no different.

**BONNIE:** Did you live in a spiritual home?

**GEORGE:** Very religious home, every morning there was Bible devotion and prayer. We had a very rigid, very strict set of rules that we lived by, and we lived by them. Dad made sure that we lived by them. It seemed as we got older that they were hard, but they weren't, really. They taught us discipline and how to cope with things in life to a degree and, in some ways, not to cope with life to a degree.

From an early age, George had a calling on his life. Many are called but few are chosen. George began ministering after a year of bible study, and he had the anointing of God on his life. I listened to a tape of him preaching in 1981, and even then he was reaching for the lost and empowering others. That was George. It is important that people are introduced to the spiritual George, his preaching, and country gospel singing.

I remember being told when I started my doctoral program that we all have two dogs inside of us—the good dog and the bad dog, and the one that wins is the one we feed the most. George's heart's desire was to serve his purpose, which was to preach the gospel to the lost. A scripture in the Bible, Jeremiah 29:13, says, "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your heart". George did that.

George became well-known through his preaching and gospel singing, which is still being played on his favorite gospel station, CJRI-FM in Fredericton. The station manager, Ross Ingram, and his wife, Gloria, were always involved in George's gospel concerts. George believed music that is anointed, can open a heart, whether it is broken or has

6 *Bonnie Clark Douglass*

become hardened from the pain of life. George made a CD in late 2005 entitled *Mercy*. I believe that George's songs and music will still minister to many.

George and I often talked about "religion" and how oppressive it could be. We had come into a place in our lives where we had been liberated from religion and were into a personal relationship with Jesus, and I believe that is why we were able to communicate about what was happening in our lives. We were both brought up without a true understanding of God's love and mercy, and were more fearful than respectful of God. After all the fear, respect of God *is* the beginning of wisdom.



Cover of George's CD

It is funny how certain people have an impact on you. While I knew George “at a distance” through church in the early 1990s, I did not know him personally. However, his anointed singing, and his powerful presence stayed with me over the years. I wondered what had ever happened to him and to George’s sons, Jason, Anthony and Jeremy.

**BONNIE:** I know for many years that you were involved in religion and you had an experience with God, I think in 2003. I think that’s when you mentioned it to me? That would be almost a year prior to you having your mole looked at for the first time. Do you recall that incident in your car, and where you were when God became real to you?

**GEORGE:** God had always been real to me, always a part of my life, even when I was not fully observing his will and his plan. It was in winter 2002–2003 when things began to materialize again in my life, and I began to walk in the journey and the path He wanted me to go. I had to lay aside a lot of the religiosity and views of different ideas, knowing that when I found out and understood His grace, when it was revealed that regardless what has happened . . . “My grace is sufficient”. When you look up the word sufficient, it means enough. It was enough to cover everything.

It was the lack of understanding of the mercy and grace of God that perhaps led both George and me off into a world on our own will. While we did not know each other, we both ran from the will of God at different times in our lives but, finally came to rest at the feet of Jesus, where we found peace. Coming to the end of ourselves might be a good way to describe it.

When we met, George was ready to preach and sing. I was working on my Doctor of Education degree through Nova Southwestern University in Florida. I had found my purpose years earlier. Raising my children as a single mom for al-

most two decades, working, and going to university seemed to be my lot in life. George and I were destined to meet and marry. It is difficult to explain when you know you are in the will of God. I will tell you about a dream I had while writing this book that reiterated to me that George and I were in the will of God. I was sitting at a desk working, and I had 25 cents in coins on my desk. This man passed by me and was in a real rush. I knew it was George Priest, from years before. When he arrived at the pay phone, he realized he had no money, and returned to my desk to see if I had any change. As he looked into my eyes and I looked into his, there was an instant connection; there was a sense of safety and trust. He reached over and gently touched my hair. That connection was there from the minute we met and it was there until George took his last breath on this earth.

George Priest walked through many valleys and saw many mountaintops in his lifetime. During the last three years of his life, George found the balance and achieved his purpose in life. George was fully empowered when he received word, in May 2006, that he had a few weeks to a few months to live.

**BONNIE:** Leading up to the place where you had the experience with God, you were in a place where your life had gone to shambles. You had an experience that got you turned around. How did you get turned around? What people were put into your life that helped you?

George often told the story that when he left the church, he said that he was going to run so fast that not even the devil would be able to catch him. And he did just that. George turned to alcohol and drugs and lived on the wild side for a number of years. But he always felt God pulling or calling him. He knew from the people who would come in and out of his life that God was always just “somewhere in the shadow”. He often said if he had not come to Fredericton, he probably would have died alone in his little room with a bottle. That is why George displayed such gratitude and faith

during his illness, and why saving other souls was his priority; even when the cancer consumed his body, his spirit was able to rise above the pain.

**GEORGE:** I was on the road a lot. There was a guy that I was on the road with and he helped in his own unique way. He would just drop nuggets of truth; we would work together when I first started that job. We will call him “Tom”. He had a lot of problems. He had a lot of religious ideas, he was tender, and he would pray with you. He knew that God was there to help. He had a real good understanding of the grace of God and how it could impact your life.

**BONNIE:** We want to know how you got back into the church, getting back into your “pastor” life. Getting back into when you did evangelism, a lot of evangelistic work, and then you just walked away from God. Then, all of a sudden due to circumstances in your life, because your life was a mess . . . I want to know how you got back into the church again.

**GEORGE:** I just started going back to church. There was a church in Saint John, a full gospel assembly. It was on the east side of the city. A nice, vibrant church. That’s where I was going to church. It didn’t fill all the voids that I had at the time. It was a spiritual church to worship in, to a degree. They had their form of Godliness. In the spring of 2004, I left my job.

**BONNIE:** When did you come to the Fredericton church, though?

**GEORGE:** Oh, long before that.

**BONNIE:** Well, that is what I want to know: when you went to the church on the Hanwell Road?

**GEORGE:** January 2004, I started coming up to Fredericton to visit with friends, and they were going to a church on the Hanwell Road. So I started coming up on weekends and staying with them and going to church with them.

**BONNIE:** Did you feel God drawing you?

**GEORGE:** Yes, I did. I was called to the ministry—to be a minister when I was a young child. I guess maybe living the lifestyle I did all those years caused me to run away from God because I didn't obey at one time, and I messed up. It caused a big kerfuffle in my life and caused me to walk away from God. Coming back, I could feel myself being drawn by the Holy Spirit to do what God wanted me to do.

**BONNIE:** You met me at the church.

**GEORGE:** That was what . . .?

**BONNIE:** February of 2004. How did you feel when you met me?

**GEORGE:** I was surprised to see you there that night when you came in. I had no aspiration of seeing you at church. I thought you went to another church in town. It was a great surprise. It was a change from when I had seen you at church when I was a worship leader [at another church] about eleven years before.

**BONNIE:** What year did you leave the church you went to?

**GEORGE:** 1993. It had been [about] eleven years since I saw you.

**BONNIE:** I never told you, but when you left the church in Fredericton in 1993, I called someone from church to find out where you worked, and I called you there, which I would have done for anyone leaving. I left a message but you never returned the call. I never had a conversation with you, ever, the whole time that you and I went to the same church. However, your children knew my children; in fact, your son, Jeremy, took my daughter, Shauna, to the Grade 9 prom at Devon School. After we met that night in February 2004 at church, you came over and talked to me and that was one thing that I said: "How are your sons?" You asked if I had ever married, and where I was living, and all that small talk. It was the strangest thing because we had

both gone to the same church for a long time [11 years earlier] and neither one of us really knew the other.

Of all the girls George's son had to choose from, he picked my daughter, Shauna. Shauna knew a lot of boys as she was athlete of the year and very beautiful. Even then, the two of them had something in common; both had gone to the same church, church camp, and other events for years. I guess as George sang that song "The Lighthouse", even then God's will was being unraveled. God always sees down the road. What are the chances of having his son's picture in my photo album, with my daughter, wearing a corsage that George bought? It might not have seemed like fate to some, but to me, I knew it was God, even then.

The night I went to that little church in February 2004 and met George after all those years, I was on my way to another church and decided to check my phone messages, just as I was going out the door. There was a message from Monty Lewis from *Bridges of Canada*, an outreach Ministry, saying that he was preaching across the way at this little church. I normally did not attend that church, but decided to go and as soon as I walked in, there was George standing in the foyer. He had blue jeans and cowboy boots on and his hair had turned gray! I had only ever seen George with a suit on, and leading worship at church years earlier. At first, I did not know who he was, and yet he looked familiar. He said, "I am George Priest."

We looked at each other and it was strange. We had both lived our own lives and we were there at this church looking into each other's eyes, and it was like I could see into his soul. In fact, I bought him a card about how I felt when I looked into his big, beautiful blue eyes. We were always buying cards for each other. George was always buying me roses and little gifts. That first night, George sat behind me and when he started to sing, I began to cry. Like I said earlier, George had the anointing. Many are called but few are chosen; George was chosen. We had both tried it all and

softly landed beside each other. That was the beginning of our great love and sacrifice for one another. It was like we were soul mates.

George started following me around the church after the service and asking me if I had ever gotten married, and I replied, “No.” He persisted with personal questions about my family; he seemed genuinely interested in our conversation, but I thought to myself, “There is no way he is interested in me.” We both returned to the same church, and the next time, he pulled right up alongside my white van and began to play a gospel song for me. I was *soooo* excited, and soon he asked me on a date. We played telephone tag and my e-mail never reached him, but we finally made plans to go and see *The Passion of the Christ*. Now, for anyone who is a Christian and has any walls up, trust me, they are coming down in this movie. We both wept and by the end of the movie, I had my arm through his, and he welcomed it! That was the beginning, and so unlike me. We just fit together, like two pieces of a puzzle.

**BONNIE:** Do you remember our first date—we went to *The Passion of the Christ*? Do you remember that?

**GEORGE:** Yes, I do.

**BONNIE:** The first time that you went up to the altar I was drawn to you. I would rarely go up and pray with a man, but God drew me right up there to pray with you.

George had automatic respect from me, which is very unusual, and people who know me well can attest to this. I am usually distant and hard to read. I have many acquaintances, but I can count my close friends on one hand. That just comes with life. I had only ever seen this man in a suit, and leading worship or praising God. It was his spirituality that attracted me, and we shared something in common—we had both been born again. That is crucial, and I believe that unless you have gone through the dark night of the soul, as I call it, two people can never truly relate mentally, emo-

tionally, and physically. But when George Priest followed me around the little church, which I went to on a whim, my whole life changed.

This was an exciting period of time for me, as I was in love. I was teaching at a local college and going to Nova Southeastern University in Florida, and was working on my doctoral proposal and ongoing programs. My “nest” at home was empty.

**BONNIE:** When did you move [back] to Fredericton?

**GEORGE:** I moved to Fredericton in April of 2004.

**BONNIE:** Where were you living before that?

**GEORGE:** I was living in another town called Sussex. I had a little bachelor apartment there. In April of 2004, I moved to Fredericton and got a job at a used car dealership because I had sold cars for years. Throughout the winter, spring, and summer, you and I began to date. We got engaged in August—apprehensive in ways, but I knew this was what I was supposed to do. And we seemed in a lot of ways compatible—99 percent compatible—but both opinionated and bullheaded. I guess that was an attraction. You had independence and you would speak up as to what you would say and think. That was an attraction, and I knew that God was in it. God began to work on me to take down some of my walls and apprehensions to being involved in an intimate relationship.

**BONNIE:** Intimate and honest. What support did you have? What helped you bring your walls down?

**GEORGE:** Prayer, acquaintances, and friends from different programs were a blessing and help in my life.

Actually, George got sick with a bad cold in the summer of 2006. We both did, and we went to the outpatient clinic. While there, George showed the doctor his mole, which was almost the size of a quarter! The doctor booked George to be seen by a plastic surgeon. We were engaged to be married

in October, and that mole was the last thing on our minds. We were blissfully married on October 22, 2004, in a small celebration, understanding the commitments of the vows we took.



George and I were married on my birthday. I was hoping that I would not have to think about my age anymore and we could always celebrate our anniversary on that day. We had a small but intimate ceremony. Our good friend, Dr. Donnie Hagen, gave me away and my longtime friends, Joan and Betty, were there. Few family members and friends attended, which George and I agreed on. We all went down to the Sheraton Hotel [now the Delta] for supper and George and I spent the night there. George was always so considerate and thoughtful. What a beautiful gift from God. Neither of us thought of not having the other in our lives.

Around the middle of November 2004, George was booked to have the mole removed from the left side of his neck. Because malignant melanoma seemed to run in his family, it was a concern to the physician.

In the picture of us cutting the wedding cake at a belated celebration the church had for us, one can see the bandage from the first surgery once the mole had been checked. It was a large mole on the left side of his neck. We were living life to the fullest, often eating out, going swimming and to the sauna, and involved in helping with renovations and cleaning at the church, while attempting to merge our two families. Combining that with full-time doctoral studies and teaching criminology at a local college, I thought to myself, “Who could ask for more?”

When I met George, his family relationships were estranged, but gradually things began to gel. I invited the boys over for Father’s Day the first year and, gently but continually, pressured him to call his mom. Gradually, things became more functional for both our families.

**BONNIE:** At the time that you had your first surgery, where you involved in the church?

**GEORGE:** Oh, yes.

**BONNIE:** What were you doing?

**GEORGE:** I was leading worship, helping the pastor lead some of the services. Doing some bible studies.

**BONNIE:** Did you feel different than you have felt in a ministry before? Or had you had that feeling before?

**GEORGE:** The feeling, the anointing came back, but it was freedom of—you know what? “You can do this right this time. You can be more of an influence on people’s lives than before and show people the grace of God. Live the grace of God in your own life. That is the biggest part of the ministry, to show people the grace of God.”

**BONNIE:** After you had your initial surgery, where the mole was removed, were you still involved in church?

**GEORGE:** Absolutely.

**BONNIE:** Were you still working?

**GEORGE:** At that time, I had been laid off from my job. The boss came in one Wednesday morning and said

I was making too much money and he wasn't making enough, so I was laid off by the time we got married in October. October 22, we got married at the church, just you and I and a couple of friends. We stood before God and man and married each other. Went down to the Sheraton Hotel, and that was our honeymoon. We started on to what we thought would be our marital bliss and happiness. God knows things, doesn't he? What's next? What next?

**BONNIE:** God's plan and our plan. We have to be prepared every day to accept the unknown. For us, from the beginning of your diagnosis, it happened so fast it was like a shock. It makes you realize that control is an illusion. December 3, 2004, we went to get the results. The mole was 3.5 centimeters by 1.8 centimeters by 0.3 centimeters, and described by the attending physician as a melanocytic lesion approximately 1.75 millimeters deep.

**GEORGE:** When the biopsy results were given to me by the doctor, I can remember it so clear when he shook his head and said, "No, it's malignant." Fear gripped my heart. It was the first time I really sensed fear. You've heard people talk about it, when people have cancer and you say, "Wow, that's too bad." But when it's pronounced on you, you feel it is a death sentence. Then there is the reprieve. Thankfully to God, there is a reprieve to cancer and His grace is sufficient.

When George walked out of the doctor's office, I looked over and smiled, he was so handsome and sweet. People who know me know I would have been in that room in a heartbeat if I had suspected anything was wrong. George looked at me and gave me a thumbs-down. I jumped up and came over to the receptionist's desk where they were setting up the appointment for further surgery, which would consist of a lymph node biopsy. The doctor said the mole showed it was

malignant melanoma [cancer], Clark Level III, and George was given a five-to-ten-year life expectancy that day. That was the beginning of the journey. Once George and I started that journey, we never looked back and we never gave up.

There was no follow-up treatment after the second surgery, completed in December 2004, which showed no evidence of residual melanoma, and the blood work was unremarkable. We saw an oncologist two days before Christmas, who explained a few things. When he asked George what he thought about having his lymph nodes removed and further radiation, George thought for a few minutes and replied, “What does a pig think about bacon?” George was very witty and fast with a comeback, and we all laughed.

Trust me, melanoma is no laughing matter. I wished I had done more research and asked more questions. Maybe we were in denial, but the seriousness and the management of the disease was not clearly explained to us that day, and there did not appear to be any urgency for treatment, if any. According to a recent article (Ferrone et al., 2005) published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, patients who have been diagnosed with melanoma have an increased risk of developing sites of second or third melanomas. These patients should continue to undergo frequent dermatologic monitoring. George had the family history of melanoma and, therefore, because melanoma is curable if detected and removed early, Ferrone et al. stated that “frequent dermatologic screening is imperative for patients at a high risk of developing this disease. Patients diagnosed with melanoma should speak with their physician regarding individual screening schedules with a dermatologist”.

Let me explain: It is a deadly disease, and should be treated immediately and as aggressively as suggested. Physicians need to be clear and concise about the prognosis, once the diagnosis is given. The seriousness of melanoma needs to be spelled out and visually laid out to the patient and the immediate family, upon the initial diagnosis, by a physician.

A CAT scan completed December 28, 2004, showed four small hypodense lesions in the liver, but there was nothing to compare them with. A follow-up CAT scan was planned in three or four months. The oncologist's letter stated, "Surgery and [the anticancer drug] Intron A will change the clinical outcome".

**BONNIE:** However, you went through your PET scan and everyone sort of breathed a sigh of relief, you know? Like nothing could ever happen to George Priest, you know? It was almost like we had climbed a mountain and got to the other side. Little did we know we were just on the other side getting ready to go into the valley—the deep, deep valley. So after you were diagnosed and your PET scan came back, no one explained the seriousness of melanoma. No one ever said, "Look, you have to have Intron A and radiation because if there is one cell there, it could travel through the body and kill you." The PET scan done in Sherbrooke, Quebec, early in 2005 was clear, as was the CAT scan.

On January 19, 2005, we saw the oncologist again, who reiterated that all the tests were negative but that they would keep an eye on the benign-looking cysts in the liver. The usual follow-up for melanoma—history and exam every three to six months—was suggested for the first two years, and then once every six months for three more years. There was no recommendation for routine CAT scans, and there was no mention or recommendation for surgery or Intron A. Because George was a part-time preacher and country gospel singer, he was proclaiming a miracle, and we went on our merry way.

In August 2005, a clean bill of health showed that George had no recurrence of melanoma, while they were keeping an eye on the lesions in his liver. In February 2006, the melanoma returned with a vengeance. When the cancer came back the second time, it spread very quickly.

George and I were introduced to many medical doctors and treatments. We want to share our experience with anyone diagnosed with malignant melanoma or a terminal illness, and with health-care professionals who are interested in seeing the process through the patient's and family's eyes.

Buy the B&N ePub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/whats-next-a-search-for-hope-dr-bonnie-clark-douglass-edd/1112438382?ean=2940014841061>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Whats-Next-Search-Hope-ebook/dp/B008VFVIOS/ref>