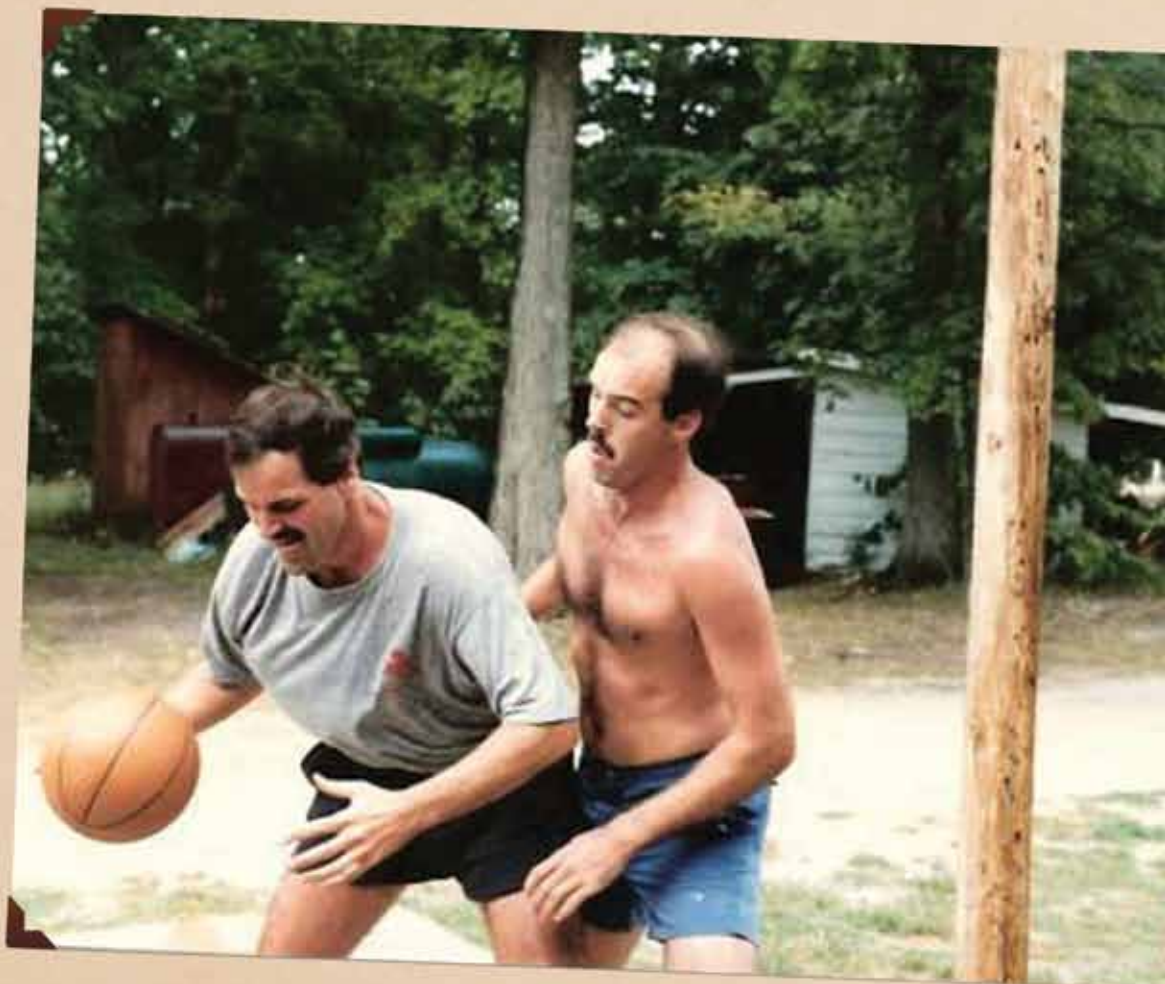


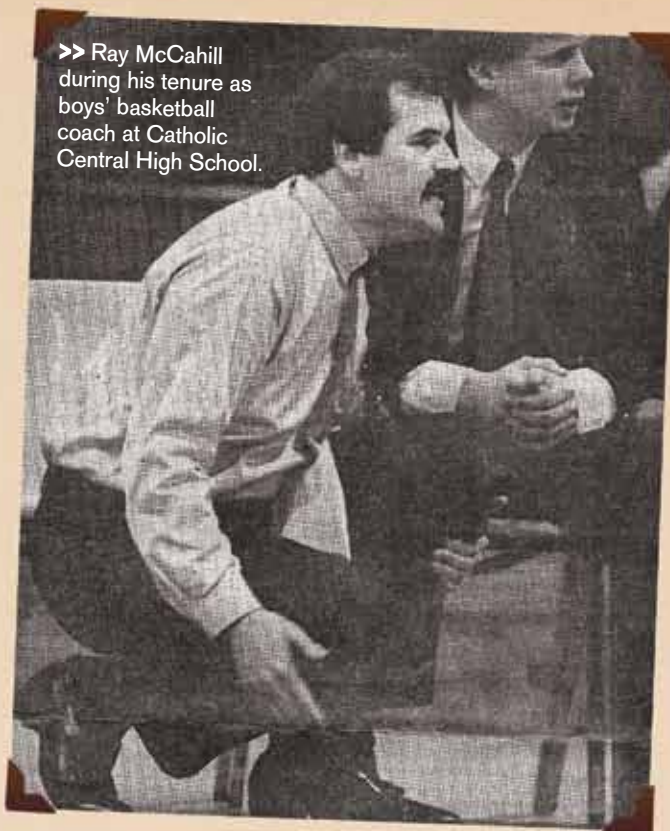
Brother

the McCahills' fight against cancer

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>> Ray McCahill during his tenure as boys' basketball coach at Catholic Central High School.

A competitive runner in high school, Dr. Larry McCahill remembers sitting in the confessional one day having an internal debate.

"I didn't know whether it was wrong to pray to win," he recalls asking the priest. "I never forgot this. He said, 'Pray like everything depends on God, but run like everything depends on you.' That stuck with me."

In a way, that describes how Larry helped his older brother Ray during his four-year battle with cancer. Though it's a battle they would eventually lose, throughout Ray's illness Larry helped plan his medical treatment; lined him up with specialists; flew in for major surgeries and even bunked in Ray's hospital room. More recently Larry has offered similar support to Ray's youngest son, Champ, as he battles brain cancer.

A former Aquinas College basketball player and coaching legend at Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School, Ray faced his illness and death in 2006 with courage and faith. While his brother's death and the loss of others in his family have challenged his faith, Larry says he has come to understand that "you can only do so much – the rest is in God's hands."

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Larry spends his days – and more than a few nights – helping patients fight cancer. He admits he is more than a little driven. “I’m a little more motivated than the average person I think,” he said. “I consider that a gift from God.”

At the same time, his faith also has “allowed me to accept defeat and that I can’t control everything,” said Larry. “But you can sure try.”

Oh, and he does more than try.

Larry, his wife Julie and their children Aidan, Logan, Madelyn and Colin, belong to St. Stephen Parish, in Grand Rapids. Grand Rapids became their home in 2009, when Larry joined The Lacks Cancer Center at Saint Mary’s as medical director of surgical oncology. He is the Director of the Gastrointestinal Multidisciplinary Program at Lacks, and previously at the University of Vermont. He also initiated and serves as the principal investigator of a nationwide multicenter clinical trial for patients with advanced colon cancer, which was initiated in 2003 and just completed in 2009. Dr. McCahill refers to this as “Ray’s clinical trial”.

‘It all started with basketball’

While medicine drew Larry to Grand Rapids, his story really begins on the basketball court.

Born in the Chicago area, Larry, the eighth sibling in a Catholic family of ten children, spent much of his childhood watching Ray play basketball. Ray, 11 years his senior, played high school ball at Brother Rice on Chicago’s South Side. He went on to become a basketball standout at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, captaining the 1974 squad.

“I’m a basketball freak,” says Larry, 47. When Larry was growing up, he’d



>> Dr. Larry McCahill in his office at Saint Mary’s Health Care.

“You really don’t get it – especially when you’re praying, praying, praying, going to church. **Then they die anyway. It challenges your faith.**”

attend Aquinas games with his family and remembers Ray as “bigger than life.”

Their sister Norine and her husband Dr. William Cunningham would settle in Grand Rapids as well, along with sister Pattijean and her late husband Jay Alt. Alt, a Grand Rapids native and All-American swimmer at East Grand Rapids High School, was diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic melanoma less than two

years after he married Pattijean. Larry was Pattijean’s point person in helping her manage Jay’s terminal illness.

“He once called me from a field training mission in Australia to discuss outcomes and provided recommendations on the next steps for one of Jay’s surgeries,” Pattijean recalled.

One of Larry’s best memories was visiting Ray – then a bachelor – when he was in 8th grade.

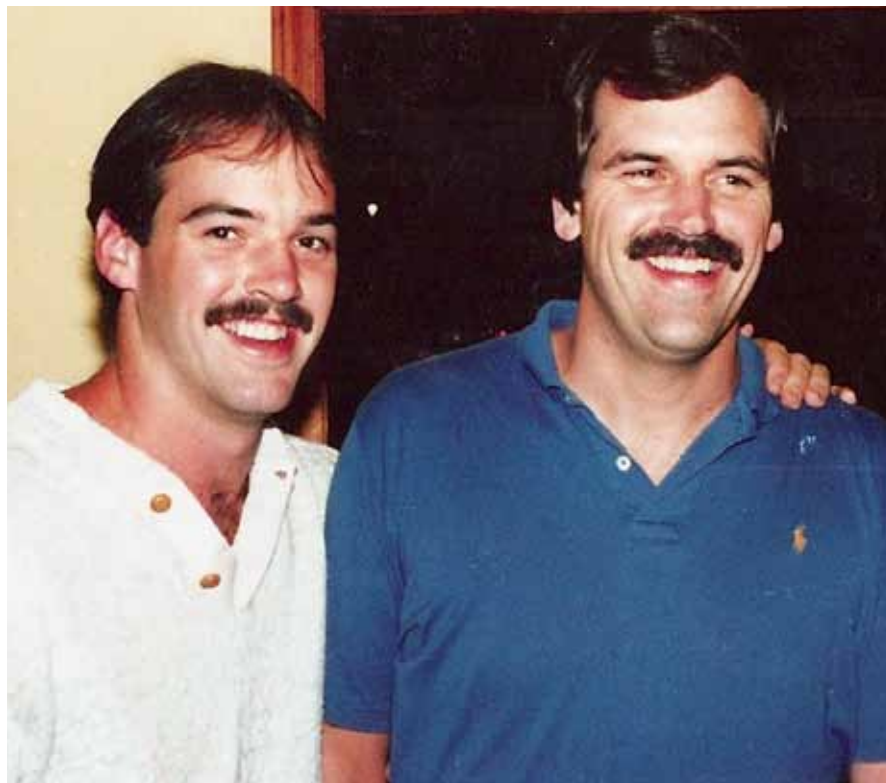
“I came to visit him in Grand Rapids and play at St. Aquinas basketball camp and he was one of the coaches,” he recalled. “I remember riding around with him on the back of his motorcycle ... so he was bigger than life.”

Ray met and married his wife Peaches in 1979 and the couple, who were married for 27 years, had five

children, Ryan, Molly, Michael, Katelin and Champlin. During the 1970s, Ray became a coach and an assistant principal at Catholic Central. Later, he and Peaches jointly owned the McCahill Group, a corporate wellness company.

Every summer, the McCahill clan would gather in Glen Arbor, Michigan. During one of these vacations, Larry took Ray on in a game of one-on-one basketball. Larry had a healthy lead and figured he'd finally bested his big brother at his own game.

That's when Ray asked Larry: "Are you ready for Moses?" While Ray was a religious man, he was not talking about the Biblical figure, but rather former NBA star Moses Malone. Ray pulled "his Moses imitation," dominating the low post and using his 6'3" frame to block Larry down low, Moses-style; victory: Ray again.



>> Ray (left) and Larry McCahill in their younger days.

Early years

Although the McCahill clan initially lived on Chicago's South Side and attended Catholic schools; the family eventually moved to the western suburbs, where Larry and his younger siblings attended public school and Catholic catechism classes.

A family with a strong Catholic faith, they would pray at night and attend Sunday Mass.

Larry's father was a World War II Navy vet and an engineer, and his mother was a nurse. His father hoped Larry would follow in his footsteps and join the Navy to pursue a career in engineering. Larry was accepted to the Naval Academy, but turned it down to pursue a biomedical engineering degree at North Carolina's Duke University. By his sophomore year, he had received early acceptance into Duke's prestigious medical school.

That year, Larry's father died of advanced pancreatic cancer at age 59. At the same time Larry's father learned he had cancer, his mother was diagnosed with primary lymphoma of the lung.

"At one point they were in the

hospital at the same time," he recalled of that difficult year. "Dad didn't know my mom was in the hospital," because his mom did not want to worry him.

After Larry's father died, his mother, a non-smoker, had two-thirds of her lung removed and was treated

with radiation. Five years later she underwent a risky operation to remove the radiation-damaged lung, but died during surgery.

The early deaths of his parents dealt a heavy blow to Larry and caused him to question his faith.



>> The McCahill brothers Ray, Larry, Tom, and Tim after a game of hoops.

Fighting cancer as a surgeon

Larry was drawn initially to surgery, with family practice as his second choice.

"I liked the broad scope of diseases that were seen in surgery," he said, noting that surgeons also treat patients of a variety of ages.

The deaths of his parents, and later his sister Pattijean's husband Jay, of cancer, influenced Larry's decision to specialize in surgical oncology. So did the nature of the field.

"It seemed to be a more cerebral part of surgery – where you had to account for other treatment options for patients besides just surgery," he said.

As a surgical oncologist, Larry treats solid tumors – most cancers other than leukemia and lymphoma.

After graduating from medical school, Larry did his surgical residency from 1990 to 1996. He and Julie, a

“ In 2002, McCahill began his practice as a surgical oncologist at the University of Vermont. **That year, he learned his brother Ray had been diagnosed with Stage 2 colon cancer; the cure rate was 60 percent to 70 percent.**”

pharmacist, were married in 1993.

"During those years it was definitely hard to keep up with family," he said, recalling that he worked 70- to 100-hour weeks and would sleep in the hospital every other night for four-month stretches. Larry served as a surgeon in the Navy from 1996 to 2000. He spent two years in Okinawa, Japan, where he started the first breast cancer clinic while serving on staff there; and two years at the Naval Hospital in Bremerton, Washington. From 2000 to 2002, Larry did a surgical oncology fellowship at City of Hope Hospital in Los Angeles.

'100 percent for Ray'

In 2002, Larry began his practice as a surgical oncologist at the University of Vermont. That year, he learned that his brother Ray had been diagnosed with Stage 2 colon cancer. Larry traveled to Grand Rapids for his brother's surgery, and spent the night at the hospital. From that time forward, the two brothers joined forces in battling Ray's cancer.

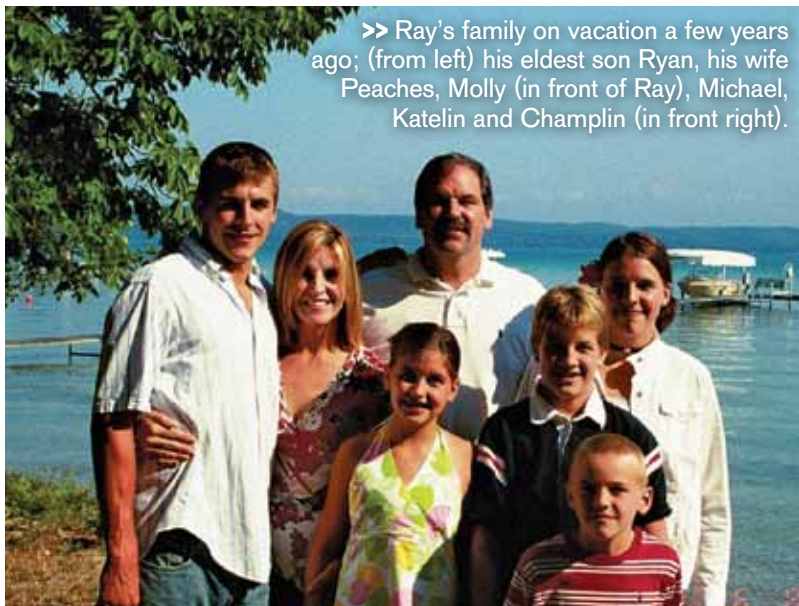
"I was able to explain to him what was going to happen and give him some guidance to through recovery," recalled Larry. "After that he was very comfortable with me as an advisor."



>> Larry and Julie on their wedding day in 1993.



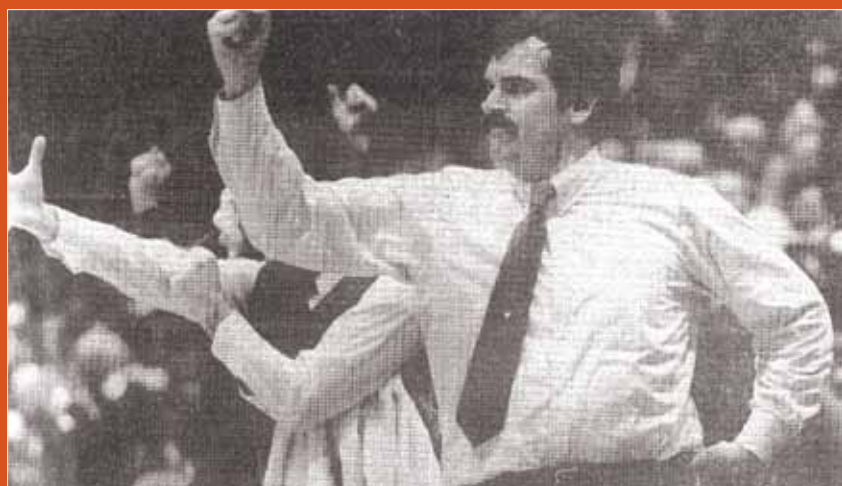
>> Larry and Julie



>> Ray's family on vacation a few years ago; (from left) his eldest son Ryan, his wife Peaches, Molly (in front of Ray), Michael, Katelin and Champlin (in front right).



>> Larry, Julie and their children (from left) Aidan, Logan, Madelyn and Colin.



>> Ray McCahill was a basketball standout and captain of the 1974 Aquinas College basketball team. He also served as basketball coach and assistant principal at Grand Rapids Catholic Central. He directly sponsored, supported, and orchestrated other sporting events in the Grand Rapids area. The Grand Rapids Sports Hall of Fame Committee has renamed its MVP award to honor McCahill.

Ray's Clinical Trial

>> The call came 10 minutes before Dr. Larry McCahill was to give a major presentation to convince leading physicians and other heavy-hitters in the medical field to back his proposed multicenter clinical trial for patients with advanced colon cancer.

McCahill, standing in the lobby at a hotel in Huntington Beach, Calif., learned that his older brother Ray had died of cancer, ending a six-year battle they had fought together.

"It was unbelievable," said McCahill, a surgical oncologist. "I just said, 'This is one more message this trial has got to be done. I thought about canceling my talk. Then I said, 'You know, this is not what he'd want.'"

McCahill came up with the idea for the clinical trial during his fellowship at City of Hope Hospital in Los Angeles. The question: should a surgical oncologist perform surgery to remove the primary tumor or focus on treating the other organs involved instead?

McCahill and a team of young surgeons developed the clinical trial at a course at the University of Vermont. It emerged as the best trial and McCahill would go on to present

it across the nation to gain funding and find study participants.

Early in the process, McCahill learned his brother Ray had Stage 2 cancer. "(The clinical trial) wasn't really his clinical scenario, but it still motivated me," recalled McCahill. "You had to sell it to these big national groups with all these world experts."

Calling it "Ray's Clinical Trial," McCahill would often put up pictures of Ray's five children as part of his presentations.

"Basically I just said; you want to be in a different position in the next generation. You'd like to know more than you did when this all started."

Seven years in the making, the clinical trial has been completed.

"We've clearly established that you don't need to take out the tumor," said McCahill. "Surgery is not going to affect their overall survival time, but it may put them through a bit of hell before they eventually succumb to their disease."

Instead, doctors can focus on providing less invasive treatments to stem the spread of the disease and improve quality of life. The study will affect the way specialists treat 15,000 patients a year who have the same clinical scenario.

Julie recalls that Larry "completely went 100 percent for Ray. He came here to stay with him and became so much more connected with his brother after his illness."

Ray recovered from surgery, afterward even beating Larry in basketball yet again. However, the cancer would later spread to Ray's liver and lungs.

Larry put Ray in touch with specialists at New York's Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center for a liver resection to remove the damaged tissue. He also had a partial lung resection. A year later, Ray would have a second liver resection.

"That was a lot to go through," recalls Larry. "You're sort of in an awkward situation where you're trying to be aggressive. But you're also causing some misery for your brother and his family. He understood the odds and was willing to be aggressive to a point."

At the same time, Larry respected his brother's wishes when he decided it was time to stop treatment. About two weeks before Ray died, the two brothers talked for the last time.

"He expressed thanks for everything I had done and really let me know he loved me as a brother."

Ray faced his death with faith and dignity, recalls Deacon Dale Hollern of St. Stephen Catholic Church. Hollern, principal of Catholic Central in the 1970s, hired Ray as basketball coach and later as assistant principal.

"He had very great faith from the first time I met with him," recalled Hollern. After the second surgery in New York, Ray called him. "He said, 'Dale, I'm in the home stretch.'"

The two began meeting, sharing faith and scripture, and toward the end planning Ray's funeral.

"He understood and accepted God's will," Peaches said of her husband. "He wasn't particularly angry. He enjoyed the moments that God gave him.... At the end he had no unfinished business."

As death approached, Ray's only wish was that his wife's face was the last that he would see. He died in her arms.

The Cathedral of Saint Andrew, where Ray's funeral Mass was held, was

packed to overflowing with family, friends, business associates and former Catholic Central athletes.

While Larry always saw his brother as “bigger than life,” he says now, “I don’t think I fully understood him as a person – how big he was. There was much more to him than a basketball player. I started to get a glimpse of that through his illness that he really understood a lot more about life than I realized.”

‘The rest is in God’s hands’

By the time that Ray died, Larry’s faith had matured. While he questioned his faith after his parents and brother-in-law died, he says that Julie and Ray’s widow Peaches have helped him see things differently.

“They have helped me to understand that you can only do so much – the rest is in God’s hands.”

During the interview for this story, the McCahills learned that Ray’s youngest son Champ, 14, (pictured at right with his father, Ray) has a brain tumor. Though illness has again been a challenge to their faith, family members say they are relying on God’s grace and leaning on one another. Julie McCahill now sees more clearly how God had a hand in her family’s move to Grand Rapids.

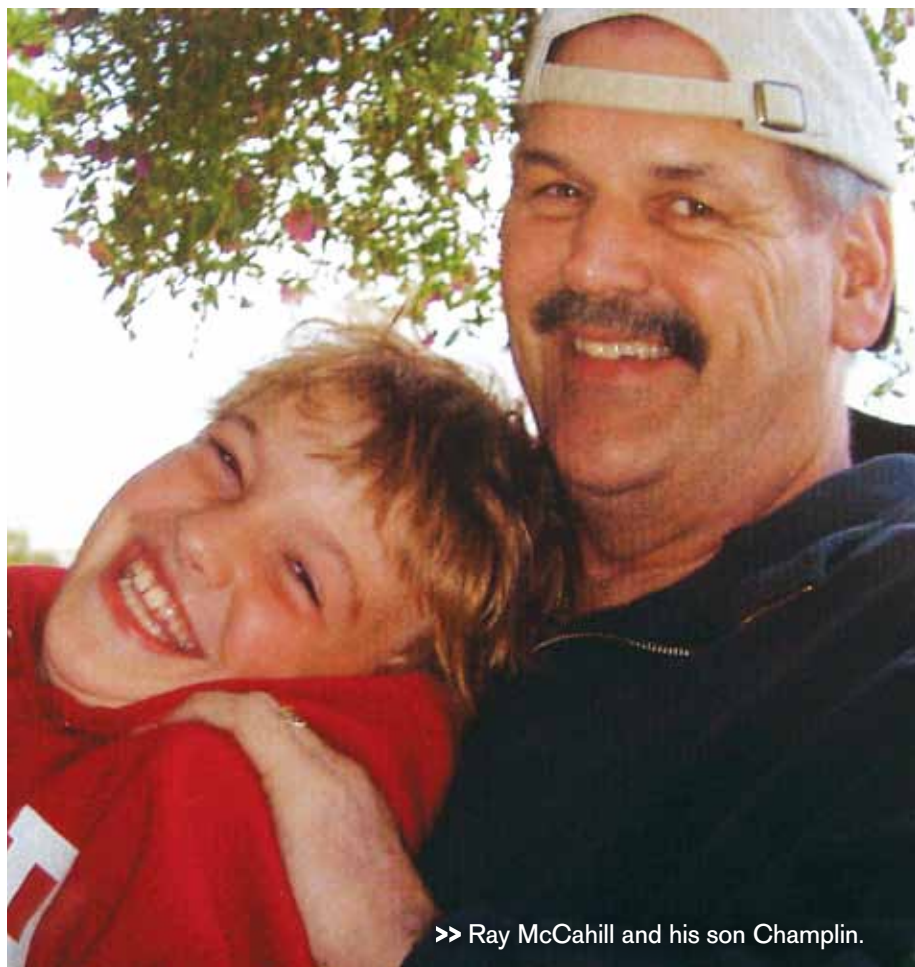
“I think now with our nephew’s illness, this is definitely where we are supposed to be.”

Peaches McCahill agrees. Just as he did when her husband was ill, Larry is helping coordinate Champ’s care and connecting the family with leading surgeons.

“He’s been extraordinarily helpful to me,” Peaches said.

Turning to God

When Ray was being treated for cancer, he would send Larry handwritten notes about Grand Rapids’ growing medical community and enclose newspaper clippings about the Van Andel Institute, where Larry conducts a multi-center, National Cancer Institute sponsored study on the quality of cancer surgery. Ray’s suggestions and letters were like breadcrumbs on the path that



>> Ray McCahill and his son Champ.

“ I think I listen well to patients and what their wishes and desires are. **I pray regularly, and I’ve never lost, despite everything, the desire to turn to God for help.**”

ultimately led Larry here to help shape Lacks Cancer Center into “a center that offers state of the art, high quality cancer care, everything people need here on the western side of the state.”

Another enticement was Van Andel Institute Director Dr. Jeff Trent’s focus on cancer and international recognition, which places Grand Rapids in a position “to become a real player in the cancer world.”

Thanks in large part to experiences in his own family, in particular walking alongside Ray through his illness; Larry says he will never lose sight of the unique needs of each individual patient. He is excited to present the results of “Ray’s Clinical Trial” to a worldwide audience of

cancer specialists at the American Society of Clinical Oncology annual meeting this month. “This should definitely change the standard of care for patients who present with advanced colon cancer. I think the results of this trial will finally answer a longstanding unanswered question for patients with colon cancer, and eliminate the need for surgery for patients with advanced disease”.

Every day Larry turns to his faith and strives to be a good person as well as a good doctor.

“I think I listen well to patients and what their wishes and desires are,” he said. “I pray regularly, and I’ve never lost, despite everything, the desire to turn to God for help.” ☪