

# One million lives saved—and counting!

Sometimes good things can come out of even the worst situations. Just ask Rhonda Sparks, whose husband's diagnosis led her to a way to keep her kids—and thousands of other families—safe in the sun!

Friday afternoon was drawing to a close and with the weekend looming, Rhonda Sparks picked up the phone. She knew the doctor had said he'd call with her husband's biopsy results, but the Modesto, California, wife and mother just couldn't imagine having to wait until Monday.

Dialing, Rhonda thought: I'm worrying over nothing. But when the nurse answered, she stammered nervously, "We were just going to call you."

And a moment later, the doctor got on the phone. "I'm sorry, Rhonda," he began. "Darren has stage-3 melanoma..."

## Fighting for his life

Darren had always been healthy and athletic. He especially loved surfing. And being blonde and fair skinned—and growing up before sunscreen was a vital beach essential—he'd weathered his share of sunburns, but never gave them much thought.

Then when he was 27, he had a mole on his back removed. And tests showed it was skin cancer.

Darren was shocked. And scared. But the doctor assured him that they'd caught the cancer before it had had time to spread.

But then, after two years of clean checkups, Darren found a small lump in his neck.

"It's probably just a swollen lymph node," Rhonda told him, noting he'd just gotten over a cold. "I had one last time I was sick."

Please let that be all it is, she prayed as Darren headed to the doctor.

But now a biopsy had revealed the unthinkable: Darren's skin cancer was back!

Hanging up the phone, Rhonda made her way to the living room, where Darren sat playing with their two young boys. Ethan was just four; Seth only two.

Oh God, how do I tell him he may not see his boys grow up? she wept.

But her tears spoke for her. Taking her in his arms, Darren told Rhonda, "I beat it once. I'll beat it again."

But when they met with the doctor, he appeared grim. Even with treatment, Darren's chances were only 10%.

No, we can't lose him! Rhonda thought, and she began searching the Internet, determined to find a miracle cure.

When she found a clinical study of a new chemotherapy drug right in their area, their hopes soared.

And soon after, they got another life-affirming sign: Rhonda was pregnant.

The news bolstered Darren's fighting spirit. "I'm going to be here for you and our baby," he vowed.

After undergoing surgery to remove the lymph nodes in his neck, he started on the then experimental drug Interferon.

"Seek to do good, and you will find that happiness will run after you."

—JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE

And somehow despite the brutal side effects—extreme fatigue, weight loss and violent body tremors—Darren was by Rhonda's side at every ultrasound and in the delivery room, too, to welcome baby Caleb into the world.

But, sadly, their joy was tinged with sadness as, with each passing week, Darren grew weaker.

"I'm sorry," his doctor told him. "The cancer isn't responding to the drug." In fact, it was spreading.

Realizing time was running out, Darren made each of the boys a special memory box filled with his

"I feel like Darren is smiling down on me," says Rhonda, now remarried, with her daughter.



favorite clothes, CDs, pictures. And he told Rhonda, "Let's get married again."

They'd only had a small wedding the first time.

But on a beautiful June day in 2001, Darren donned a tux and Rhonda slipped into the wedding gown she'd always dreamed of wearing. And in front of 300 teary-eyed loved ones, they pledged their eternal love to each other.

Three months later, Darren was gone.

It's not fair! Rhonda wept, her heart shattering.

## For Darrens everywhere

For a long time, Rhonda was lost in grief. Knowing that Darren's cancer had been preventable only deepened her sorrow. She knew that knowledge had haunted Darren, too.

After being diagnosed, Darren had even batted around the idea of creating a line of protective beach shirts to keep kids safe in the sun.

"That's a great idea," Rhonda had told him.

And once he was gone, she realized, it still was.

After much research and trial and error, she came up with a shirt design. A blend of nylon and Lycra, the shirts had the feel of a swimsuit but were made out of a fabric that provided 98% protection from the sun's ultraviolet rays. And so kids would want to wear them, Rhonda had them made in a variety of fun colors and patterns.

She named her company UV Skinz and set up a website (UVSkinz.com), where the shirts quickly started selling.

The first year, she sold 3,400. The second, 25,000! And after adding an adult line, sales really took off.

Today, they've sold more than one million shirts!

"That's one million lives potentially saved!" she beams. "I know Darren would be proud to know he's responsible for keeping so many people safe. And I can't think of a better way to honor his memory."

—Kathy Fitzpatrick

## 3 ways you can stay safe in the sun!

### ✓ Wearing red!

Opt for clothes with tightly woven fabrics in red or blue—a Spanish study found those offer the highest ultraviolet protection factor, while yellow and white offer the least!

### ✓ Avoiding this pitfall!

Think SPF 50 sunscreen is almost twice as effective as SPF 30? Nope! SPF 30 blocks 97% of rays; 50 blocks 98%! The safest bet? Wear SPF 30 and reapply it every two hours.

### ✓ Popping vitamin A!

Add a vitamin A supplement to your regimen—experts recommend a daily dose of 3,500 IU\*—to help prevent melanoma. A new study suggests it can reduce your risk by up to 40%!

\*Check with your doctor before taking any new supplement.

Photos: Dianne Conn/iKONIK; iStockphoto.

