

When Mark Hill went for an appointment with his urologist Dr. Cullen Jumper, he wasn't expecting his next stop would be a biopsy to test for prostate cancer. "Men just hate that idea," he said of the biopsy. "I remember he told me that it wouldn't seem as big of a deal as I thought. He talked me through it. He was always really to the point."

The biopsy was easier than he'd anticipated but the results were hard to hear. He had 12 out of 12 markers test positive for cancer. Under Dr. Jumper's care, he was referred to surgery at another hospital, and then returned to Exeter for radiation where he found a familiar face: Dr. Gary Proulx. The two had gone to college together. "I just felt like he was going to take care of me," Mark said. "He sits down with you every week during your treatment and goes over everything."

Still, Mark was not eager to start radiation treatment and feared it would totally wipe him out. He was dreading the many daily doses that lay ahead of him when he arrived home one dreary April day and found a group of vultures on his roof. It seemed like an ominous sign. But when he mentioned the vultures to a friend who knew about birds, he learned something surprising.

"They told me vultures are noble birds," Mark recalled. "In Native American culture, they are revered for their patience. I liked that. With months and months of treatment left, I could relate."

The vultures were a sign, but not of impending doom, rather, a way to get through those 44 doses of radiation. His neighbor Jennifer Diggs, who creates fabric art under the name This Birds Absurd, crafted Sparky, a vulture for Mark, and the bird became his companion. "He signified patience," Mark said. "There's not a lot of fun and games going on with radiation, but I started bringing Sparky into treatments and everybody just loved him. He was like my spirit animal."

Doing his radiation treatments at Exeter was easy. He scheduled them at 3 p.m. every day and got to know the routine of swiping his card to enter, meeting his team, and being done in less than 10 minutes.

"It was not anywhere near as bad as I thought it would be," he said. "I worked every day. I would tell them that getting in and out of Cumberland Farms was more of a challenge than going to the hospital."

Along the way, Sparky became something of a celebrity in the radiation department. "Everybody wanted a picture with Sparky when they saw him," Mark said. "Everybody should have a Sparky, if it helps get your mind off (what you're going through) or helps signify something important."

Mark has since completed his treatment and looking forward to what's next. "Exeter, they took care of me, and they still are," he said. "I would totally recommend Dr. Jumper and Dr. Proulx."