

# Hermiston man deals with tough diagnosis

By **KATHY ANEY**  
STAFF WRITER

Hearing he had five years left to live jolted Jeff Sepulveda.

The Hermiston man and wife Rebecca got the grim prediction from his doctor in October at the Oregon Health & Science University Hospital in Portland. Sepulveda has scleroderma, an autoimmune disease that attacks healthy tissue. People with scleroderma often experience stiffening and tightening of the skin and connective tissue, the feeling of slowly turning to stone.

In Sepulveda's case, the disease affects his lungs. Pulmonary function has dropped to 46 percent as the fibrosis in his lungs worsens. The couple digested the devastating news as they drove home to Hermiston after the doctor's appointment.

"It hit me and my wife pretty hard," he said. "It was a quiet ride home."

They looked for options, but found few. Sepulveda takes a drug called mycophenolate to keep the disease at bay, but it's not a cure.

"It slows the process down," he said. "It's not a cure by any means."

Other treatments show promise but are still considered experimental by insurance companies.

Stem cell transplantation seemed to offer the most hope. Jeff's stem cells would be collected. He would undergo chemotherapy to destroy his malfunctioning immune system and then the collected stem cells would be returned to his body. The process takes several excruciating months and the outcome isn't assured. The added life expectancy could only be a few years, even if all goes well.

"It's not a for sure deal," he said. "It may take or it may not."

The procedure is expensive. Sepulveda will have to provide roughly \$200,000 out of pocket. Friends and family are working to raise the money.

The 37-year-old has a lot to live for — his wife, two young daughters, a close extended family, a good job at Les Schwab Tires and



Jeff Sepulveda of Hermiston was diagnosed with scleroderma, a fatal autoimmune disease that attacks a person's lungs, this summer and was told by his doctor he had five years to live.



Poor circulation in the extremities was Jeff Sepulveda's first sign that something was wrong after he was diagnosed with Raynaud's disease.

unfinished dreams.

"My priority right now is being here for my wife and kids as long as I can," he said.

Rebecca is focused on Jeff.

"He's pretty quiet and super hard working. He's a great dad to our kids," she said. "This has all been a big shock to us."

About 300,000 Americans have scleroderma, according to the Scleroderma Foundation. The disease, which is difficult to diagnose because it shares symptoms with other autoimmune diseases, typically comes on between the ages of 25 to 35.

ine him hefting tires and fixing brakes at the Hermiston Les Schwab. Growing up in Boardman, he loved long-distance running and continued to run and bike for exercise as an adult.

So far, Jeff says life hasn't changed too much, although he's had to dial it down. He is taking off the winter from work because the cold air affects his lungs. It takes longer to complete physical tasks such as mowing the lawn.

A close look at his hands shows purple fingers, a symptom of Raynaud's disease, which he's had for the past 16 years. Raynaud's is

linked with scleroderma. Despite the grim reality

of his condition, at least outwardly, Jeff's outlook seems as bright as the tree that glows in his living room. He and Rebecca are humbled by the supporters who are working to raise funds for the stem cell transplant or just offering words of encouragement.

"It has been amazing," Rebecca said. "People near and far have reached out to us."

Flyers hanging around town list several options for those interested in helping. Look for donation boxes at Les Schwab, Shell stations or Ace Hardware, deposit to the "Donations for Jeff Sepulveda" account at Bank of Eastern Oregon branches, go to [www.gofundme.com/jeffs-scleroderma-battle](http://www.gofundme.com/jeffs-scleroderma-battle), pay five dollars for a "Fight for Jeff" wristband or attend a fundraising dinner at 5 p.m., Feb. 9 at the Port of Morrow Conference Center. To purchase tickets or donate an auction item, call Tia Sepulveda at 541-314-3509 or Dawn Coleman at 509-308-3666.

## West-end cities get grant for housing study

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
STAFF WRITER

The cities of Umatilla, Stanfield and Echo are joining forces to study housing needs.

The cities received a grant from the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development to develop a housing needs analysis. They will work with consultant Angelo Planning Group.

According to a news release, while the city of Hermiston has been participating in discussions with the other three cities about addressing housing shortages in the west end of Umatilla County, Hermiston will not be part of the project because it already completed a very similar housing analysis in 2017.

Umatilla community development director Tamra Mabbott said the project will include a look at housing needs now and 20 years down the road, an examination of residential land available for development and a study of barriers to that development. It will culminate in a set of recommendations for the cities.

Mabbott said those recommendations may be policy changes for the city council to implement, or zoning changes an expansion of the urban growth boundary or other strategies.

"It's important to have a set of recommendations in place because it sets the stage for other work that needs to be done," she said.

Mabbott said there will be multiple public meetings

set for sometime in January, where developers, homeless advocates and other stakeholders can give feedback on housing needs in the area. She said the report will likely be wrapped up by June.



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