As a veteran educator, Jack Musgrave has spent a career encouraging others to never give up.

With the help of the supportive doctors and staff at the UK Markey Cancer Center, it’s a lesson he’s applied to his own experience as he has received treatment for stage IV liver and esophageal cancer.

As a result of his fighting spirit and the expert care he has received, Jack, now 78, has lived more than a year longer than the prognosis he originally received from another doctor.

“It’s overwhelming when you get diagnosed with cancer,” Jack said. “It’s like a stop sign pops up and everything changes. But I’ve always been a positive person. So this was the time to start not just believing it, but living it.”

Seeking options

Jack had always been pretty healthy, staying active by swimming, riding his bike and working in the yard. He routinely visited his local primary care doctor for a checkup every six months.

In April 2012, he was having some mild discomfort in his abdomen. When the doctor pressed on his stomach just below the rib cage, there was some soreness and swelling.

After further tests elsewhere in Lexington, doctors determined Jack had advanced liver and esophageal cancer.
The first oncologist he visited said that based on Jack's age, he likely had only six months to live, maybe nine months with chemotherapy.

But Jack and his wife, Gayle, weren't going to let that be the last word on his disease. “We both chose to look for other sources, go and talk to other doctors,” Jack said. “When you hear you have cancer, you want to make sure you’re doing the right thing. You don’t want to regret later not getting a second opinion.”

Jack scheduled an appointment with Lowell Anthony, MD, at Markey Cancer Center. The doctor who made the original diagnosis had said he only saw four or five patients a year with cancer like Jack had, but Gayle knew the staff at Markey were likely to have much more experience treating a serious form of cancer.

When Jack and Gayle told Dr. Anthony about the initial prognosis, his response was simple: “Well, we don’t accept that.”

“Dr. Anthony told us he treats people with this disease who have lived for years,” Gayle said. “That was one reason I wanted to go to Markey – they treat enough people to know the optimistic side of cancer treatment.”

Treated as partners

Jack’s treatment has included a dose of an oral chemotherapy drug every other week, as well as trips to Markey every three weeks for infusion therapy.

Dr. Anthony set one clear goal at the beginning of Jack’s treatment. He wanted to keep Jack out of the hospital. And for the most part he has done so. Jack was recently admitted to the hospital only for a procedure to repeat his initial tests.

“He said he would dedicate himself to looking at all the new treatments, all the things coming out all the time from research,” Jack said of Dr. Anthony. “He’s treated us as partners with him.”

Jack has also taken advantage of some of the other services available at Markey, such as music therapy.

“There isn’t any kind of music Jack doesn’t like,” Gayle said. “So when the music therapist came in and asked if she could play guitar and sing, they were both in seventh heaven.”

Focusing on hope

Jack said he has focused on hope, laughter and love throughout his treatment. Hope came from that first meeting with Dr. Anthony.

He gets plenty of laughter from spending time with his seven grandchildren, who all live nearby. Two of the younger grandchildren have gone to Markey with him and asked lots of questions.

He said he’s been overwhelmed by the love he has felt from his family and friends. Their encouragement has helped him stay strong.

And most of all, Gayle has been by his side every step of the way.

“I tell everyone Jack is my hero, and he is,” Gayle said. “He’s taken on what most people think is an impossible task, fighting this disease. So I’m proud of him.”

For more information about the services available at the UK Markey Cancer Center, call 800-333-8874.