It was last May when Kurt, also an assistant Track & Field coach at Mt. Lebanon, noticed some blood in his stool, prompting him to schedule a biopsy. A colorectal surgeon at St. Clair Hospital performed a colonoscopy which gave him some cause for concern. It was during the follow-up colonoscopy that Kurt’s gastroenterologist found a tumor in his rectum. When a biopsy revealed it to be cancerous, Kurt was referred to Leigh Nadler, M.D., a colorectal surgeon at St. Clair Hospital.

“I was really disappointed and surprised when this was discovered,” recalls Kurt, a retired Social Studies teacher in the Chartiers Valley School District. “I had no history of cancer in my family that I knew of.”

Dr. Nadler says the tumor was in the lower part of the rectum, and extended to the upper rectum, so it was quite large.

“I performed rectal ultrasound, important for tumor staging, and identified enlarged lymph nodes indicating potential tumor spread,” he says. “Tumors in the rectum are initially treated with radiation and chemotherapy, prior to surgery. So fortunately, here at St. Clair, we have the UMP/CTL Cancer Hospital Cancer Center with radiation oncology and a team of excellent medical oncologists.”

In addition to Dr. Nadler, Kurt also saw Vincent E. Reyes, M.D., a medical oncologist at St. Clair. Dr. Reyes says that comprehensive care for the patient is critical to have a successful outcome because it takes coordination to make sure the patient is getting the right care and in a timely manner.

“Rectal cancer requires the coordination of this comprehensive care center because its treatment involves radiation oncology, medical oncology, and surgery,” he says. “Kurt’s case really exemplifies how you need coordination and cooperation between all these specialties.”

Prior to having surgery to remove the tumor, Dr. Reyes recommended Kurt have a full course of radiation, along with chemotherapy. The chemotherapy primarily involved a drug named Xeloda, which Kurt took in pill form.

“Kurt did great with those treatments and the tumor shrunk down to the point where it was almost gone,” says Dr. Reyes.

The purpose of radiation therapy — which was performed from June through August by Robert Werner, M.D., a radiation oncologist at UPMC/CLC — is to reduce the size of a tumor, which, in turn, can help prevent the need for a permanent colostomy.

In mid-September, Dr. Nadler performed surgery to remove the tumor. This included preserving important nerves and creating a “J-pouch” out of the colon in order to improve post-operative function and continence with less urgency once the temporary ostomy was reversed. The colon pouch functions as a reservoir, similar to the rectum, he says.

“Kurt did very well following his operation. Fortunately, there was no tumor spread to any lymph nodes,” Dr. Nadler says. “There was still cancer in the rectal wall, but it was much smaller due to the radiation effects. He had no post-op complications and was discharged home in a few days. The plan from that point was post-op intravenous chemotherapy and then reverse the J-pouch to restore normal bowel function.”

Dr. Nadler agrees that treating rectal cancer takes a team approach — a combination of the medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, and surgeon.

“Here at St. Clair, all of these team members come together and meet once a week to discuss cancer cases,” he says. “Together, we can discuss these cases in a multidisciplinary forum and determine the best treatment approach with rectal cancer. It's important to determine who needs preoperative treatment with chemotherapy and radiation.

After being diagnosed with rectal cancer last spring, one of the first phone calls that Kurt Wentzel, the 67-year-old assistant coach of the Mt. Lebanon Football team, made was to head Football coach Jeff Donati, to let him know he would understand if he needed to resign.

“My greatest concern was missing so much football,” recalls Kurt who has coached football for 41 years, including 10 years at St. Anne’s in Castle Shannon, before joining the staff at Mt. Lebanon. “I knew I could possibly miss as much as six weeks because of the chemotherapy alone.”

Jeff says that Kurt called him to explain his treatments and surgery, and figured that he would have to miss some time during the season.

“Kurt is a great coach and wonderful for the kids, so we wanted to do everything we possibly could to keep him on board,” says Jeff. “He really enjoyed visiting with the kids. He’s a positive influence on them and the kids absolutely love him.”

Ultimately, Kurt decided to stay on and work through his treatments, which included six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and then surgery, followed up with another four months of chemotherapy.

“All of the physicians involved in my care were very professional and friendly,” says Kurt. “Everything was explained in great detail to me and all of my questions were answered and my concerns addressed.”

Cancer patients at St. Clair are afforded the full continuum of care, without leaving the community. That was a big plus to Kurt.

“At first I thought I was going to have to go to a cancer center across town or somewhere, but then I learned that St. Clair Hospital has everything I needed to fight cancer right here,” Kurt says. “I understand chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and surgical cancer care. It was very convenient for me and it made things a little easier. Also, everyone from the physicians to the nurses and the support staff made this thing as pleasant as possible. They were wonderful. I don’t understand how they can remain so nice under trying circumstances.”

It is wonderful. I don’t understand how they can remain so nice under trying circumstances. For more information on comprehensive cancer care at St. Clair Hospital, and to see a video of Kurt Wentzel’s story, please visit www.stclair.org.
The St. Clair Hospital Cancer Care Center offers a multi-disciplinary approach that provides quality care and treatment for adult patients and their families in all stages of the cancer continuum — from early detection, to initial diagnosis, through treatment, to palliative care. This approach is designed to assure optimal outcomes, patient satisfaction, and quality of life.

St. Clair Hospital’s Cancer Care Center is accredited as a Comprehensive Community Cancer Center with Commendation by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer, the highest rating that can be achieved.

With St. Clair’s highly skilled medical staff and partnership with UPMC Cancer Centers, patients are afforded many of the sophisticated services available at the highly regarded Hillman Cancer Center, without leaving the community. These services are available for patients with cancer of the breast, colon, esophagus, head & neck, liver, lung, pancreas, prostate, reproductive system, skin, and other organs.

Last July, St. Clair debuted our new Sipe Infusion Center for oncology patients receiving chemotherapy and other treatments. In January, the Hospital broke ground for an addition to the UPMC/St. Clair Hospital Cancer Center, a joint venture between St. Clair Hospital and UPMC Cancer Centers. When completed this summer, the addition will house a second linear accelerator, which will be used to provide cancer patients access to treatments such as image-guided radiation therapy, or IGRT, to help better deliver radiation therapy to cancerous tumors. Our board-certified surgeons provide expert care, using the latest surgical techniques and technology, including robotic-assisted surgery, to benefit patients.

St. Clair’s focus on survivorship is demonstrated through our supportive services for cancer patients. In 2011, more than 1,000 oncology patients received rehabilitative services in the form of ostomy care, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy.