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A Better Way

A simple idea and product helped Ken Schena feel normal again

By James Rada, Jr.

When life hands you lemons, make lemonade, as the saying goes. It's an appropriate description of Ken Schena's life. Of course, he doesn't mind squeezing lemons. What he didn't want to squeeze was his ostomy bag in order to clean it.

In 2002, Ken retired from his position as the managing director for MetLife in Naples and Fort Myers, Florida. He was looking forward to retirement, but then his son, Blaine, convinced his father to help him form a new company called The Schena Financial Group. Ken went from planning golfing outings and boating trips to working the long days required to start a new business. It was all consuming.

For the first time in many years, he missed his annual physical. "MetLife required an annual examination for the insurance, but I didn't have time while my son and I were very busy starting our company," Ken said.

As the company started to get some traction in 2003, Ken finally had time to plan a vacation to New Hampshire where three of his children lived. He also had time to visit the doctor for his physical. He was feeling fine so he expected it to simply be a routine physical.

"My health had been good. I was playing tennis four or five times a week. I guess what should have given me a clue was that I thought that I had hemorrhoids because I would bleed when I played at tournaments," Ken said.

While on vacation, the doctor's office called him and said that the doctor had seen something in Ken's x-ray and wanted him to have a CAT scan. Ken went to a local New Hampshire hospital to have the CAT scan taken and the results were sent to Ken's doctor.

Once the doctor reviewed the CAT scan, he scheduled Ken for further testing when he returned home. Among the tests was a colonoscopy – Ken's first – that revealed carcinoma. The doctor recommended that Ken consult a colorectal surgeon.

"I was in an absolute state of shock," Ken said. "I had

had several friends who had died recently of pancreatic cancer and the doctor could not tell me if it had metastasized."

Ken began studying everything he could find about colorectal cancer, particularly who the top surgeons were. He discovered that two of the top surgeons in the country were at the Cleveland Clinic in Naples.

Ken consulted Dr. Jonathan Efron at the clinic as well as an oncologist and radiation oncologist. The doctors agreed that before any surgical options were undertaken for the cancer, Ken should undergo radiation and chemotherapy treatments that lasted for hours.

Ken didn't hesitate. Within a week of finding out his options, he had a dual-port catheter inserted in his chest and had begun weekly chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

"I had never gone through anything in my life quite as painful as the last weeks of the treatment," Ken said.

His only relief came from lowering himself into a hot Jacuzzi bath filled with Epsom salts for a couple hours.

"My body was so devastated and I was in such pain that my wife finally told me, 'They gave you pain pills for a reason. Take them,'" Ken said.

He did and that also helped some.

He endured the treatment for six weeks and then he was on a six week break so that his body could regain some of its vigor. Ken also took the time to travel to Mass General Hospital in Boston for a second opinion. The doctor there confirmed the diagnosis.

Returning to Naples, Dr. Efron laid out his options. He appeared to be cancer free from the treatments, but if even one cancer cell was left, it would eventually grow and he would die. His safest option was to have an ostomy and post-operative session of chemotherapy.

He underwent the surgery and returned home after five days in the hospital.

"The doctor walked into my room on the fifth day in the hospital and asked if I wanted to go home. You bet I did, I could not get dressed fast enough," Ken said.

While recovering at home, Ken went through the "why me?" phase that many ostomates go through. Once he accepted that "why" didn't matter, only what he would do next, his attitude improved and he looked

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The Schena family – Ken Schena on the left.

forward to making the best of the situation.

He was shown how to attach the ostomy bag to his body. Then he asked, "How do you clean it?" When he was shown how to squeeze the waste from the bag, it was a process that seemed to leave just as much still in the bag as in a cup or disposable bag.

"Some people try to wash the bag out in the sink, but I didn't want that stuff in my sink where I wash my hands and face," Schena said.

He knew there had to be something better; something simple and quick. "You have no idea about the psychological downer it can be to wake up with this pouch on your abdomen that collects fecal matter. It is devastating at first," Ken said. He started searching the Internet for something better. He was a very hygienic person and he couldn't believe that in the 21st century someone hadn't come up with a way to clean an ostomy bag that didn't actually involve handling waste.

He went to a local medical supply company and bought one of everything they had to clean ostomy bags to see if something worked. It didn't. "I remember telling the woman in charge that if there's nothing out there, I'm going to invent one."

He thought that if he could get water to run through the bag and then out the drain into the toilet, it would better clean the pouch than trying to squeeze out the waste, which Ken just couldn't accept.

One of Ken's hobbies was flying radio-controlled model airplanes. He decided to use a fuel line hose to connect the bag to a water bottle. He also designed a manifold in the upper quadrant of the bag that didn't need to be squeezed and held open. Once the system was hooked up, water could be run through the system

to clean it.

The prototype worked, but Ken continued refining it to make it easier to use and more effective. A water bottle attached to one end could be squeezed to send pressurized water through the system. It thoroughly cleaned the bag and his stoma and then the dirty water went out the drain into the toilet.

"In 30 to 90 seconds the bag is totally evacuated and the stoma is clean," Ken said. His idea also eliminated a major complaint of people who use disposable ostomy bags. They are also simple to use, but often, there is a lingering bad smell from the waste. Ken's system was not only easy-to-use, but the waste went directly into the toilet.

He knew that he was on to something. His prototype was easy to use, fast, and allowed him his dignity. It was one more step in returning his life to a sense of normalcy. After his colorectal surgery, Ken had joined an ostomates support group. He found himself sitting next to a couple where the wife, a woman named Alice, had undergone colorectal surgery.

"She seemed like she was in a state of shock," Ken said. "She didn't say anything. I learned from her husband that she was having trouble adjusting to the way things were." One of those troubling adjustments was cleaning an ostomy bag. Ken went home and built another one of his cleaning systems and lent it to woman to see if it helped her.

"You cannot even imagine the change in this lady," Ken said. "She was talking and outgoing. I realized that people needed something to help them lead a normal life." That's when he decided that he needed to market his cleaning system so that people like Alice could feel in control of their lives and have a sense of normalcy.

Ken further refined his system (Ken holds five U.S. patents and six foreign patents on his system) and brought it to market as the Ostomy EZ Clean Pouch System. The system can now be attached to a faucet with a grip handle on the tube to control water flow and he has designed a system optimized for traveling. "This is a product designed by an ostomate to the needs of ostomates," Ken said.

It also happens to be something that the Ken uses to give himself a better quality of life. Five years after his surgery, Ken remembers that his doctor walked over to him after his check up and said, "Mazel tov, you're cancer free." ☂

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