

Charging Against Cancer
by
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What lengths would you go for your dog's life? That question was put to the test for me and my golden retriever Charger in May of 2010, when I happened to notice a small bump on his muzzle. That little bump was unfortunately diagnosed as a Stage 2 Mast Cell Tumor.

Over the years I've known friends whose dogs were diagnosed with various cancers and I swore I would never put my dog through chemotherapy, radiation, multiple surgeries, or spend thousands of dollars for what – maybe the chance that he would live a few more months? At that time Charger was a very healthy and fit 7 year old competing in agility, so imagine my shock when I was told that even with successful chemotherapy, Charger had 6–7 months to live. How could this happy, healthy dog be gone by December?

I went to the University of Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine for help. The school is among the top veterinary schools in the country and has achieved widespread recognition for its research programs. As luck would have it, the oncology department was conducting a clinical trial studying the efficacy of the simultaneous use of two chemotherapy drugs on mast cell tumors. Charger was enrolled in the study. It might help him, and if it didn't, maybe something could be learned that would help others.

Every Tuesday for the next 11 weeks, we traveled to Madison where Charger received vinblastin intravenously and palladia orally. Potential side effects were nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. There were times we had to delay treatment for a week because his white count was too low and he would have been prone to infections but thankfully Charger never got sick or demonstrated any adverse effects to the treatments.

At the conclusion of the chemotherapy trial, the oncologists were happy to report the mass had shrunk almost 40% and could be surgically removed. On top of that good fortune, a resident at the veterinary school was training in reconstructive surgery. As a result, Charger's procedure appeared as a barely visible "face-lift". With half of his face still shaved from the surgery, Charger

returned to the agility ring in August. Two qualifying runs (a qq) and 1st and 3rd place finishes told everyone he was back.

In December at the Hounds for the Holidays agility trial, we celebrated Charger's 8th birthday. If you recall he wasn't supposed to be alive! And that's when I decided to start a canine cancer research fund appropriately named Charge Against Cancer. I printed out a sign on an 8 ½" x 11" sheet of paper and announced my intentions at that morning's briefing. Astonishingly by the end of the weekend, I had collected over \$700. I was surprised by how many people, mostly strangers, came to me in tears with money and a story of their dog that had lost his battle with cancer.

When you're a new entity asking for money and you don't have "not for profit" status, fundraising is difficult. I learned how expensive it was to become a 501(c)(3); I certainly couldn't afford it so I asked the University for help. After all, I was raising money for them! I met with the Director of Development for the UW Foundation, and asked to borrow their tax exempt number (yes, I really did that). He chuckled and said no, but offered this – the Foundation would draw up a memorandum of agreement between the veterinary school and me, creating the Charge Against Cancer Fund. Imagine, three words printed on a piece of paper turning into a permanent endowment fund at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine, raising money for canine cancer research.

That was in 2011. Since then Charger's cancer has returned twice and each time Charger has fought it off: the first time with another round of chemotherapy and surgery, and the second time with radiation and chemotherapy. Charger is the only dog still alive from that initial clinical trial and he continues to fight and live a golden life, as any old dog should.

To date, over \$24,000 has been raised for canine cancer research and our message continues to spread. Last winter our story was featured in On Call, the veterinary school's newsletter, <http://www.vetmed.wisc.edu/dog-trainer-leads-charge-against-canine-cancer/> . Donations have come in from across the country to our website, www.Charge-Against-Cancer.com, and fundraising events have been held in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. Answers must be found. Each time Charger and I go to Madison, we meet more people whose dogs are affected by this terrible disease. Although cancer is often thought to be an "old dog" disease, I've seen more and more people bringing in

their beloved pets diagnosed with cancer who are younger than 5 years of age. Research is the key to diagnosing and beating this dreaded disease.

This week Charger had his monthly checkup and treatment. Everything continues to look good. As we were about to leave, I met a woman whose dog is battling lymphoma. He is enrolled in a clinical trial where half of the dogs that were initially enrolled have died. She questioned whether or not she should continue with his treatment. My advice to her – just because the treatment isn't working for the other dogs, doesn't mean yours won't be the one dog that it does help. It's been 5 years, 57 appointments, and over 9100 miles traveled, but Charger is living proof that it only takes one to make a difference.