

This is not a eulogy for Mike Morris.

When the day comes to deliver a eulogy for Mike, the theme will be obvious: He certainly lived a full life.

For now, we say Mike “is,” not Mike “was,” because there is no need for past tense. There are more pages to write in the book of Mike Morris’ life.

For the few people who might not have heard, Roanoke’s Mike Morris was diagnosed with Stage 4 renal cancer in August. First, a brain tumor was discovered and removed last July. At that time a tumor nearly the size of a baseball was found on his left kidney.

Morris, one of the founders of the Smith Mountain Lake triathlon, ran in that event on April 30, making it the 300th triathlon of his career. He received media coverage for the feat which, combined with the cancer diagnosis, made for a defying-the-odds story so compelling that it went viral. Covered by the local television stations and a column in the Roanoke Times by Aaron McFarling, the local media gave Morris lots of pub. The Gray Television, the parent company of WDBJ7, made it available to affiliates all over the country and most aired the story.

“My daughter-in-law’s sister saw me on the news in Burlington, Vermont, people saw me in Wichita,” Morris says. “It has been put on Youtube. I kind of thought I’d announce it locally and next thing I know I have people from all over saying they saw me.”

Triathlon is, essentially, a solitary sport. You might have friends in events and training partners, but it’s fundamentally a test of strength and will out on a course, alone in a crowd. That suits Morris well. A man who built a successful accounting practice, he is a private person who did not plan to make any announcement about his battle. Then Dr. William Fentel encouraged him to tell his story.

“Dr. Fentel said, ‘You could really help people with your story.’ I didn’t think there would be this much public interest in it,” Morris says.

“If I can help just to one person, it will be worth all the people telling my story.”

Morris is a motivated person who is inspirational even without the cancer battle. After having brain surgery in July, he was told he could not take to the water for three months because of the likelihood of infection. So, Morris waited four months before being back out there, tackling two triathlons in Florida this past November. While in the Tampa area, he found the Moffitt Cancer Center.

“I went to do a race in Fort de Soto, Florida. I met a guy there who [the Moffitt Center] cured of neuroblastoma,” Morris said.

While he still consults with doctors working in the Lewis-Gale Medical system here, he goes to the Moffitt Center for scans and procedures.

The Florida events came after the renal cancer diagnosis, so he was on the course while undergoing treatment, no easy task, especially when the medication causes fatigue.

The will power of a triathlete helps Morris soldier on. It's what earned him a spot in the Team USA triathlon team in years past. That willpower allowed him to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. He's raced triathlons on six continents, swam in the Danube River, the Ming Reservoir in China, Hyde Park in London, the Hudson River which was part of a race that ended in Central Park in New York City, as well as hundreds of other locations. Morris even swam from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco as part of a race.

A full life, indeed.

For Morris, the next big test is a scan on May 27. That will tell him if things are improving. At his last scan in February, the tumor was smaller. Doctors are considering removal of the kidney, but have not decided on a course of action.

Morris said there are drugs that have a success rate that eliminates cancer 5 to 9 percent of patients. It's not great odds, but it's better than nothing. The scan he had in February showed a reduction in the tumor's size, but it's still there and it's still potentially deadly.

Morris says he has divided the future into segments, with the goal of reaching each milestone. Grandchildren numbers seven and eight are on the way and he wants to be here for their births this summer. Of course, there's a triathlon this summer, too, in Winston-Salem, which he's entered.

Morris will turn 69 in October, and he intends to make that birthday, as well as Christmas.

After that, who knows? Morris says he's not in control of how long he lives, which is frustrating for a man who's always been in control of his life. Maybe things will go well for years to come. Maybe not.

"The Indians said, Only the rocks live forever," Morris says. He doesn't expect to live forever, but a bit longer would be nice. Still, whenever it ends, he knows he made the most of this life.