Denny LaVercombe is beating the odds. When the Helena resident was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, doctors gave him only six months to live—a year at the most. That was four years ago.

Thanks to the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center, Mr. LaVercombe is a member of a rare group—only 5 percent of patients with pancreatic cancer survive five years after diagnosis.

An Unusual Tan

Mr. LaVercombe first noticed something was wrong in April 2005. He had just retired from a long career in marketing and was looking forward to traveling and spending time with Jan, his wife of 46 years. At one of his grandchildren's baseball games, however, Mr. LaVercombe received some unusual compliments.

“People kept coming up to me and saying, ‘You must be playing a lot of golf lately because you’ve got a tan,’” Mr. LaVercombe recalls. “But my wife said it was yellow, not tan.”

Mr. LaVercombe was diagnosed with jaundice and sent to a local Birmingham hospital for more tests to determine its cause. His doctors discovered a tumor in the head of his pancreas, but they were confident that the tumor was small and could be removed with surgery. However, things did not go exactly as planned.

Mr. LaVercombe had been in surgery for only an hour when the doctors found that the tumor was actually the size of a man’s fist—too large for them to remove. “They basically closed me up and said I had six months to a year to live,” Mr. LaVercombe recalls. “They suggested chemotherapy and radiation to extend my life as much as I could.”

Mr. LaVercombe quickly began chemotherapy and had six weeks of radiation therapy, but he felt unsatisfied and discouraged with his progress. That was when his friends and family suggested he get a second opinion and referred him to UAB.

A Will to Live

Within two weeks, Mr. LaVercombe had an appointment at the Cancer Center with former UAB surgeon Selwyn Vickers, M.D. Because of the location of the tumor and Mr. LaVercombe's age, the prospect of surgery was daunting.

"Dr. Vickers wanted to know how badly I wanted to live, because the surgery is difficult and so is the recovery," Mr. LaVercombe says. "But my wife was my biggest supporter. She said we were going to fight it to the last day. When you have that kind of emotional support, that's half the battle."

So in January 2006, Mr. LaVercombe had a Whipple procedure, which successfully removed his gallbladder, common bile duct, part of the duodenum and the head of the pancreas. He was told while still in the hospital that he was cancer-free. Doctors cautioned, however, that his aggressive cancer had a high risk of recurrence.

Sure enough, scans six months later showed that Mr. LaVercombe's cancer had returned, and he began another round of chemotherapy. This time he was under the care of Cancer Center associate scientist Tina Wood, M.D., who prescribed a more aggressive regimen of chemotherapy.

Mr. LaVercombe quickly discovered that chemotherapy at UAB was quite different from his previous experiences. "Dr. Wood gave me a lot of encouragement, which I had not really had

from my earlier doctors," he says. "The staff at the infusion lab is incredible. Everyone there is so upbeat."

By January 2007, the cancer had disappeared, and life for Mr. LaVercombe returned to normal. A few months later, however, he experienced yet another recurrence. This resulted in another four months of chemotherapy, which he completed in September 2007.

A Patient Advocate

Mr. LaVercombe describes his experience with pancreatic cancer as "a real journey. When you go through something like that, it changes your whole perspective on life. I knew there was limited hope because of the statistics, but I'm proud to be a survivor."

Mr. LaVercombe credits his faith and his family's support for helping him beat those statistics. He still comes to the Cancer Center four times a year for CAT scans. "That's always an emotional experience, hoping that they don't find anything," he says.

His experience with the disease also has inspired Mr. LaVercombe to raise awareness about pancreatic cancer and educate others about the importance of funding research. He is heavily involved with the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PanCan), serving as the education and awareness coordinator for Birmingham. He helped establish an affiliate chapter of PanCan in Birmingham and also is working with the American Cancer Society (ACS) to establish an advocacy group for pancreatic cancer.

“When I was diagnosed four years ago, very little information about pancreatic cancer was available,” says Mr. LaVercombe, who traveled to Washington, D.C. in March for National Advocacy Day to raise awareness for research funding. “It’s still kind of a mystery disease. Only 2 percent of cancer funding goes to pancreatic cancer. People just don’t know as much about it.”

Besides his work with PanCan, Mr. LaVercombe also volunteers to drive patients from the ACS’s Hope Lodge to the Cancer Center for their treatments. He has felt so good and healthy that just before the holidays, he got a job at Target. “I think I’m their only full-time part-timer,” he says.

Mr. LaVercombe also participates in the Cancer Center’s Courage Companions program, which matches newly diagnosed patients with survivors for one-on-one emotional support. He likes to tell others about the benefits of being so close to a facility such as UAB.

“Some people don’t realize what UAB can do,” he says. “My brother lives in Minneapolis, and he called me after I was diagnosed and said I should go to the Mayo Clinic. About a week later, he called back after talking to some doctors there who said, ‘Why would he want to come up here? They can do everything at UAB that we can do here.’”

This year, Mr. LaVercombe will celebrate his 70th birthday and his 47th wedding anniversary. He encourages other cancer patients never to give up and to live life to the fullest. He also urges them to get a second opinion and always remember that progress is made every day.

“So many people think you’re either living or you’re dying,” he says. “A lot of people don’t realize that you can actually live with cancer. I’m living with it, and I’m still fighting.”