Susan Wells
Fort Worth, Texas

Susan Wells is a woman with a message. She has a deep love and respect for life that she conveys with a delightful sense of humor. Her impish, slightly crooked smile indicates the fight she has gone through to preserve her own life and to bring health to others. In her crusade to ensure that donor blood will always be available when it is needed, she radiates infectious warmth. To be with Susan is to feel good.

As Senior Marketing Coordinator for the Carter Blood Center in Fort Worth, Texas, Susan knows what blood donations are all about. As both blood donor and blood recipient Susan has a respect for the need and the process that is beyond what most of us can understand. Along with that, she knows the realities and the facts. On first meeting she will tell you that blood donations save lives. She wants to make it fun to donate blood because right now it is not on most peoples agenda even though in her area of North Texas 1100 new donors are needed every day to save lives.

Susan began donating blood when she was a teenager. She also had tumors removed from her ovaries when she was 17 and was told that she could never have children. She believes in the miraculous. In spite of her diagnosis, in her early 20's Susan was fortunate enough to get pregnant and gave birth to a health son, her only child. At that time, she hemorrhaged and needed blood. Several years later, she had a hysterectomy; she again hemorrhaged and need blood.

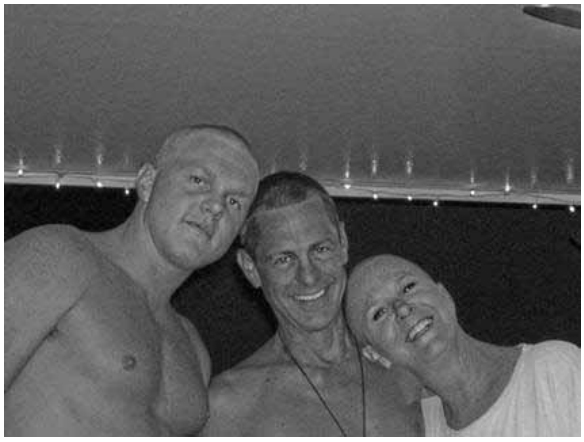
In 2001, Susan found a knot behind her ear. What was initially diagnosed as Hodgkin's lymphoma, with a prognosis of six months to live, was later determined to be benign tumors that needed to be removed. Following surgery, Susan had some numbness and discomfort but life was better…and she had just gotten her new job with the Carter Blood Center. She was very excited about that.

Susan loved her new job

> *"every day I got to see the difference blood donations made to people's lives. I got to see and meet survivors who I think are the strongest soldiers in the world. They are the ones who are making a difference."*

She worked sixty hour weeks. She was passionate and driven. But it seemed to be taking a toll on her. She again had severe headaches and she knew she needed care. The tumors had recurred, with a vengeance. There were four tumors, she was told, that need to be removed from her, inside her head. She was told that even with surgery, her chance of survival was 30%. Without it was only a short time. When she made the decision to have the surgery she began to make preparations. She did not want her husband or son, or anyone, she said, "*to be scared*." So, she tried not to be herself and made every effort to be positive. She named her tumors after

the Beatles, she wrote in her journal, she prepared to be out of her office for three months and did the work necessary to cover the time she was gone, she paid her bills. Then she threw a party for her friends so she could say "*good bye*." The night before her party, Susan, her husband and son all shaved their heads. Humor was her constant companion.



There was good news! Susan survived radical surgery and the tumors were benign. But what was first diagnosed as four tumors turned out to be twelve. Nerve damage was extensive and a major nerve was transplanted from her ankle and foot into her head. She had lost a lot of blood.

She said that the third day in ICU she had a moment of "*clarity*." She was weak and thought she was going to die. While she thought she was only thinking her feelings, she was apparently talking out loud. "*I was going down hill fast,*" she recalled. "*I felt worse that I had ever felt in my entire life, but it wasn't pain, because I had plenty of pain meds. I just felt hopeless*."

She heard a voice say "*You are not going anywhere*." It was John, her nurse, who walked in and then told her "*it was her lucky day; he was giving her a blood transfusion*."

Susan claims she asked John if he had given blood. He said "*No, I never have*." She replied, "*If you are giving the blood to me you have to go the blood center and donate.*"

According to Susan, the transfusion made all the difference. "*It was an incredible feeling. When you are so in the darkness and get blood, it was the strength coming back. It gave me hope. Imagine the best feeling you ever had in your life. That's what it felt like when I got the blood. I felt like superwoman. At that point I thought I could do anything.*"

She was then on the road to long difficult recovery. She would not have gotten that far without the donor blood.

Next, she had six weeks of radiation. She says that made surgery seem like a walk in the park. "*Radiation is bad. Every day was a struggle to get up*." Her face was swollen. She drew strength from her friends, her husband, her son, her pink wig

Instead of the planned three months, Susan did not go back to her work at the Blood Center for six months. But she continued to support the things that were important to her. She was invited to be a guest at the Volunteer luncheon, honoring a volunteer she deeply admired. In her movie star attire and her pink wig, along with a swollen bruised face. She had a message and gave it with her accustomed

humor. This event lead to more luncheons and speeches where she could share her story and her message of the importance of blood donation.

Her message is simple but coming in the context of what she has survived it is even more powerful.

> *"It is not just about giving blood, it is about living our lives. It is about not taking anything for granted. It is about not putting stuff off until later. I often ask people to focus on one person in their life they love. When they think of that one person, I tell them to go out and do something special for that one person, something meaningful – like giving blood! Actually that is probably one of the greatest things you can do for someone you love. That's what life is about. Don't wait until it is a personal issue"*