

# Crossroads of the Heart

By Sedona Callahan Photo by Derek Smith

**D**r. John Hanrahan had just dropped off his wife, Maura, and two children, Molly, 5, and Liam, 2, at the airport. They were leaving to spend time with family in Florida, while John was off the next day for a four-day solo camping trip in Death Valley, California. The purpose of his trip, he explained, was a kind of vision quest — through fasting and meditation, he hoped to formulate a plan for the next phase of his life. “Maura tried this a couple of years ago, and at first she thought it was a waste of time,” said John.” But after about a year, she realized that the three things she wished to change had occurred.”

John had successfully completed treatments for colon cancer just a couple of months before. He sent the following e-mail to his family and friends: “*We received great news tonight that my recent PET scan and CT scans this week were normal with no sign of cancer!! We are thrilled. This is a huge first step.*”

John and Maura, both family practice physicians, attended medical school together, marrying in their last year. “She’s the love of my life,” he pro-

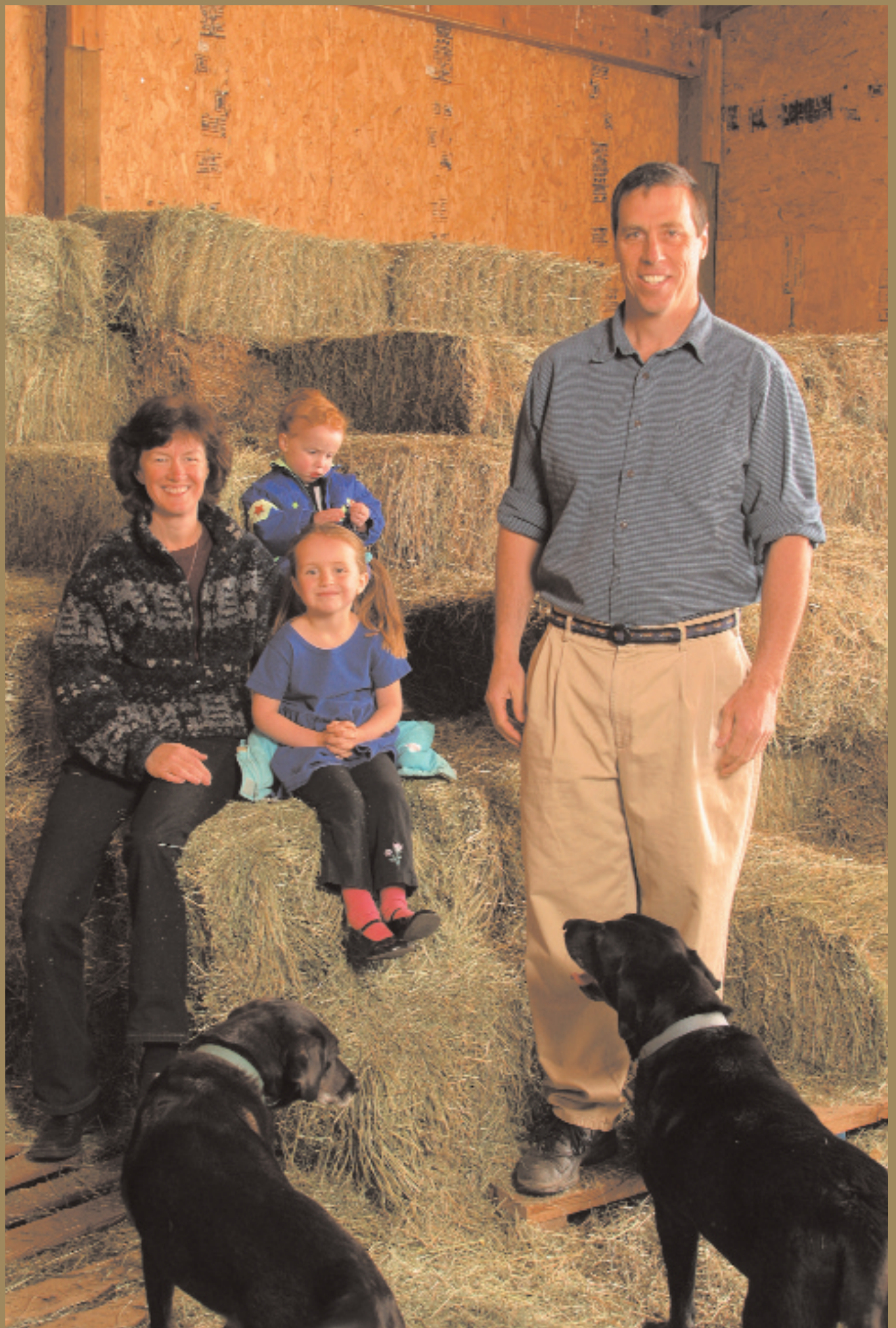
claimed. The couple then followed three-year residency programs at a hospital in North Carolina that accommodated married residents. It logically followed that John and Maura worked hand in hand researching the most effective treatment for his cancer. “Both of us being doctors helped us to navigate the details of going through the process,” John said. We went to four different oncologists, and three different programs were recommended. If we had gone with the first recommendation, which was conservative, we might not have had such a positive outcome.”

When dealing with any illness or accident that throws one’s own mortality to the front and center of conscious awareness, the physical healing is, as John so wisely noted, the first step. Just as a mother dashes into the street to protect her wandering child from harm’s way, then later explains safe practices to the child, a long-term illness evokes the same process: first get the cancer out, then make good choices to avoid a recurrence. Along with the questions of how to keep oneself physically healthy when faced with a life/death situation, issues of life priori-

ties and choices emerge. “Spending time with my family became much more immediate,” said John.

Well known in the Park City community as a local physician, as well as for his community service and leadership, John now has some anxieties about stepping back into the roles he performed prior to his illness. Is it the best use of his time, talents and energy? He was following in the footsteps of his parents, who had set the stage for altruism by volunteering within their local community. The dedication of his life to caring for others was further nurtured at a Jesuit high school and Quaker college, where service was part of the campus culture.

The Leadership Park City program crystallized the value of getting involved. “I knew in a vague, general sense that there was a lot of poverty and people were suffering,” John said. “This thought was always percolating that I would do some global health work at some time in my life, but I thought it would be when I retired.” In the late 1990s, John accompanied his friend Joe Mitchell, a local pastor, on a humanitarian aid trip to Guatemala.



But when a malnourished 2-year-old girl with pneumonia died soon after being brought to the makeshift clinic where John was volunteering, he was struck by the urgency of need. "She weighed less than my daughter weighed at birth. I thought, 'here's a little girl who could have been my little girl!' If she had been brought to us in time, she could have been just an antibiotic away from making it."

This heart-wrenching experience was John's catalyst for establishing, along with Joe Mitchell, The Hope Alliance, a Park City-based non-profit organization which provides medical clinics, trains health workers, and operates clean water, educational and micro-business projects in communities in need throughout the world. In order to devote his full-time attention to The Hope Alliance, John left his position at Park City Family Health Clinic, where he worked in family practice. "It was more important to do something that impacted more lives, even if I earned less money," John noted.

The bumper sticker on John's beloved truck reads, "Live simply so

others may simply live." It's a statement he and his family follow. "We were in a position where we could financially make it. We have a reasonable house without a big mortgage. We drive our cars until they die at 200,000 miles, and we take low-budget vacations, like visiting family or going camping. Also, Maura and I have always had a relationship that is based on going with what your passion is. She's okay with my going on these [medical mission] trips." John and Maura had some concerns, however, about his leaving their children for four weeks a year, doing medical missions. "But when I come back from these trips I'm re-energized in my connection to my family. And I think this work can help to broaden my kids' horizons."

The Hope Alliance now has enough volunteer physicians available to support its medical clinics around the world. If it weren't for the long duration of his cancer treatment, John might not have noticed quite so acutely how his energies had been diverted from hands-on caregiving to fundrais-

ing for the organization in his role as president. "I have a passion on the volunteer and expedition level, but not for fundraising," John said. He is now considering a different role for himself within The Hope Alliance, perhaps as part-time medical director, participating in two humanitarian trips a year, as well as looking at the possibility of practicing medicine within a wellness clinic environment.

In addition to the traditional western medical treatments for his cancer, John practiced yoga, exercised when he was able, used guided imageries and affirmations, and sought the help of an energy worker. "One thing that has evolved with me over the last couple of years during my own illness is the awareness that we take care of people who are already sick. We should keep people well, through an integration of western traditional and complementary treatments," he said, referring to such programs as those he used during his illness, as well as preventive medical programs.

No matter which path John embarks on, his commitment to service will continue. He recently accepted the position of president of Rotary Club of Park City. "I initially got involved in Rotary for my own self-serving interest in Hope Alliance and the People's Health Clinic [which he also helped to establish in Park City], for projects and funding. But it has become an organization that is real central for me. Internationally, it's one of the pre-eminent humanitarian organizations in the world."

It's caring individuals like Dr. John Hanrahan who contribute to making Park City a great place to live, raise our children and provide the stage and backdrop for our own community efforts, both local and world-embracing. "Maura and I have a sense of kinship here — with great friends who are actively engaged in the community. It's my hope that everyone here could see the desperate need in the world, and respond by doing with a little less, sharing their excess so that others might have the most basic of needs." *£*

*Sedona Callahan is grateful that good people like John Hanrahan contribute to Park City community life.*

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