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# On his own terms / S.F. coach Nate Lewis lives out last days in peace at Zen Hospice

September 15, 2002 | By C.W. Nevius, Chronicle Staff Writer

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In the small hours of a chilly April night in San Francisco last year, Nate Lewis reached for the phone. He was wide awake.

In fact, he hadn't slept in nine straight nights, ever since he'd been told he had some kind of complicated bone marrow disease. He knew it was bad, as he'd listened to the prognosis, but at the time he was so stunned he wondered if he had heard it all correctly.

His physician, Dr. James Burke, an oncologist at UCSF Medical Center, had given him a home phone number and told him to call any time.

This was the time.

"There's no tape recorder running, and I am not trying to get anything," Lewis told him. "I just need some cold, hard facts."



Nate Lewis in the garden at Zen Hospice, where he came to terms with his mortality. Chronicle photo by Darryl Bush

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Dr. Burke had them. Lewis had multiple myeloma. Probably about a year at best. No magic bullets. No miracle cures. He could try chemotherapy to extend his life expectancy to a year and a half. At the time, Lewis was 56 years old.

"I will never forget the conversation I had with him before I knew the diagnosis was final," Dr. Burke said. "I knew what he had before I saw the biopsy result -- a young man with a terrible disease. My father had the same disease at the same age."

This is a story about life, death and the time between that lacks only a happy ending: Nate Lewis died on Aug. 29.

It's not the story of how someone fought an incurable disease to the very end, refusing to ever give up. Lewis did something more difficult: He shut down the anger and desperation and moved on with living and controlling his life. He refused chemotherapy after trying it once, and chose to spend his last months

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at Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco.

There he learned that while there is no escaping the finality of death, it can be a rare opportunity to explore and examine life. A major reason that Lewis declined chemotherapy was that he wanted the clarity to put his life in order and learn to accept the inevitable.

"In some ways," said Dr. Burke, "the time between when you know you are dying and your death can be the most interesting time of your life."

The irony is that doctors suggested to Lewis that chemo might prolong his life as much as nine months. Actually, without the side effects, he ended up with very much the same life span. Lewis gives the credit to the spirituality of the Zen Hospice (although he did not practice Zen Buddhism) and the sense of closure he was able to find. This is not as common as you might think.

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