

# Winning Three

## Peter, Paul and Mary member discusses life with a urostomy

By Rolf Benirschke

Most of us who meet a celebrity are disappointed when they don't quite live up to the image we have created in our minds. But when I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul & Mary, to talk about his life and his ostomy, there was not a sliver of disappointment. Peter, Paul & Mary were an international folk group sensation of the 1960's and recorded 16 albums which included such beloved classics as Leaving on a Jet Plane, If I had a Hammer, and Puff the Magic Dragon. Peter is a wonderfully humble, interesting, and genuine guy with a big heart, who happens to have a urostomy.

Growing up in New York, Peter was raised by Ukrainian-Jewish immigrant parents whose own parents, who had emigrated years before, were so proud of becoming Americans that they honored that fact by creating a family rule, "We are now Americans, and we will no longer speak in Russian or Ukrainian. We will only speak in English."

Peter's parents also set an ethical example that impacted him greatly, "As Jews", they said, "we believe that our lives are made most meaningful when we give to others and do our part to help heal the pain and suffering of our time." Peter continues, "When I see that I can make a difference, when somebody who needs help is struggling, or where there is injustice being done, that's when I know I need to jump in. There is real joy in doing this...but it's also an honor to carry that responsibility, even though it can sometimes lead to disappointments or become a burden."

Peter's desire to help others and to amplify the humanity in the world and the hope that comes when we offer our compassion, love, grace and listen, has inspired people everywhere — including me!

For college, Peter enrolled at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, where he ended up starting his singing

career quite by accident. Although he got his degree in Psychology, he also instructed in an undergraduate course in folk music that changed his life's direction.

Those early years taught him to understand the power of music and realize that singing folk songs together, which expressed people's joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, could open their hearts and unite them in spirit with a determination to effect positive change. Much of his music addressed the social and world stage challenges of

the day, like the Vietnam War and the human rights activism of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Peter was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2021 and endured three brutal months of chemotherapy — the maximum dose — that led to horrible side effects. "Everything went wrong," Peter sadly remembers. "I had GI tract issues, rashes, terrible nausea, lost my appetite, and I lost 25 pounds...a lot for a slight man in my eighties."

After the chemotherapy, Peter had to have his bladder surgically removed and it was discovered, unfortunately, that the chemo was unsuccessful because some cancer still remained active in his lymph nodes. Peter's oncologists told him he needed to try a new immunotherapy that had a 50-50 chance of being effective. The cancer was not curable, but if the immunotherapy worked, his life would be prolonged. By how much, no one knew.

He quickly accepted the challenge and wanted to move forward immediately because he felt he had a lot more creating, singing, living and helping to do! With a spark of determination in his eyes he enthusiastically recalls, "I was raring to go. I wanted to take on this cancer. I wanted the best shot and if my best shot was to go through what turned out to be another terribly punishing course of immunotherapy, I simply wanted to get on with it." After the immunotherapy, Peter had a full year and a half of amazing recovery, strengthening, and

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soon he was able to perform again. He considers his recovery a total miracle, for which he is beyond grateful.

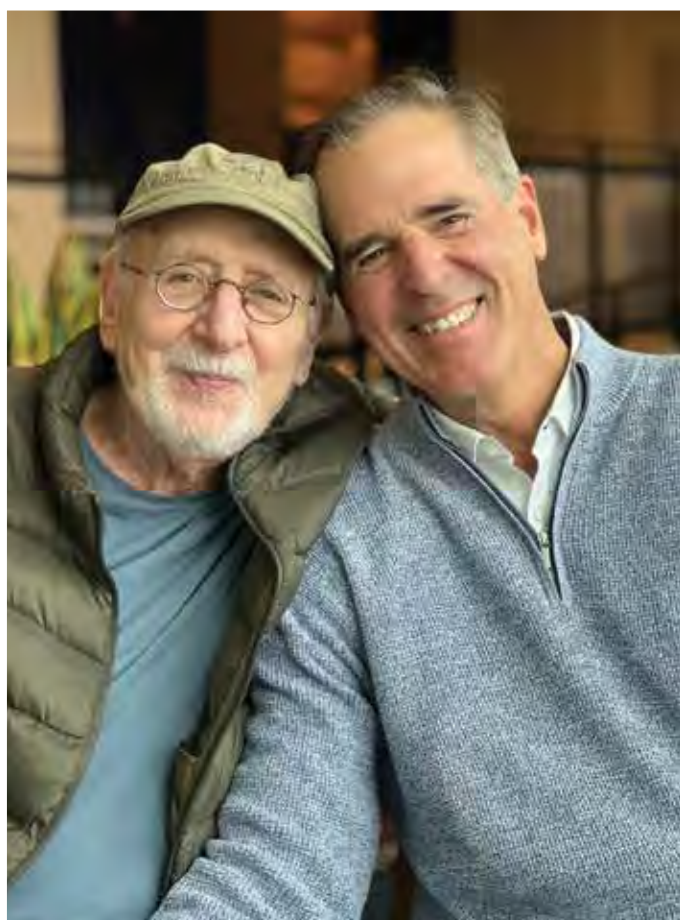
When we discussed the adjustments of life with an ostomy, Peter stated matter-of-factly, "At first it was hard for me to see a portion of my intestines on the outside

of my body, but it took less than a month for me to understand and become proficient in the mechanical side of living with a urostomy; emptying and changing the appliance, managing the skin around my stoma, or making whatever lifestyle adjustments I needed to make



*Left: Peter Paul and Mary sing at their induction into the American Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2006*

*Below Left: Peter Yarrow with author Rolf Benirschke in 2024.*



when I traveled, performed, as I reentered my very busy life." Like all ostomates, Peter had some accidents early on that woke him up in the middle of the night due to a leaking bag that required a bed sheet change. And, he even had to deal with an accident one time when he was performing on stage. Thank heavens for dark sweat-pants and the ability to call for an early intermission! Of course, these were uncomfortable situations, but Peter accepted the fact that they were short-term problems, and he was determined to get through them. Happily, his wish came true.

In addition to the physical adjustments, Peter shared how his ostomy surgery dramatically changed his outlook on life — he told me that he became much more appreciative and more grateful about life than before he was diagnosed with cancer! The cancer did return and continues to return but Peter now views it like any other really serious chronic disease. He says, "There's a race between the progression of the cancer and the development of new drugs that can arrest the cancer's progress and prolong one's life."

So far, he and his doctors have won this race twice and he feels sure he's winning the third race right now.

When our discussion turned to how his upbringing impacted his outlook on his ostomy, Peter humbly shared that his Jewish background set the stage for an

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*A nurse at The Pouch Place helping an ostomate with a smile!*

a special section of supplies for their Share Program. Pouch Place nurses still consult with the local hospitals and doctors. They also provide ostomy training programs for medical support staff in care agencies and facilities.

### **Satisfied Customers**

Here is what the Pouch Place's patients are saying: Angi Martin, "After having emergency surgery six months ago that left me with an ostomy I had home health care that ordered my supplies. Now at home the hospital recommended The Pouch Place. I not only received excellent customer service, I also got a last-minute appointment with

Pouch Place locations until she stepped down in 2023. She turned the management of the stores to Rebekah McQuade, BSN, RN, CWON. Rebekah is now The Pouch Place's executive director.

Today, The Pouch Place has over three thousand customers and patients and is very active in bringing their ostomy expertise and knowledge to the communities they serve. They provide space for the local support groups and publish their newsletters. Through their Share Program they provide ostomy supplies to the uninsured, indigent and homeless with the Red Cross and other social service agencies. Each store has

two absolutely amazing ostomy nurses. I can't recommend the Pouch Place enough." Deanna Lloyd says, "The Pouch Place provides a service available no place else, and knowing they're there gives me great peace of mind." And finally, Kristy Smith wrote, "I have been using them since 2010. They are very, very friendly and helpful. Anytime you need help, they are always there. They have everything you need."

For 32 years the Pouch Place has remained true to Beryl Evans's founding promise, "Attend to the needs of each patient as an individual first and everything else second." 🌈

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understanding that life is all about healing each other. The Hebrew term is, "tikkun olam" which teaches that you cannot attempt to try to heal the whole world, but you must not shrink from doing what you can.

In 2000, Peter founded "Operation Respect", an educational non-profit focused on combating school bullying and it has taken that message to over 20,000 schools across the country. His friend wrote the theme song, Don't Laugh at Me, which epitomizes the program, and will resonate for many of us in the ostomy community as well:

*I'm fat, I'm thin, I'm short, I'm tall,  
I'm deaf, I'm blind, hey, aren't we all?  
Don't laugh at me,*

*Don't call me names,  
Don't get your pleasure from my pain.  
In God's eyes we're all the same.  
Someday we'll all have perfect wings.*

It was a true honor to meet Peter Yarrow and now call him a friend for two reasons; one, he was one of my wife's favorite musicians and some of my special early dating memories were hearing her sing those folk songs and two, Peter is a fellow ostomate which makes him a very special friend and ally. When I asked Peter what wisdom he'd like to share, a look of tenderness crossed his face as he said, "It is my hope that my words and my story help to reassure my ostomy brothers and sisters. This is a challenge, but life actually becomes brighter after you have an ostomy. For me, life has become more precious, present and rewarding." 🌈