

JIM WITTIG '90, A SPECIALIST IN TREATING  
A RARE FORM OF CANCER, SPENDS HIS DAYS  
SAVING LIVES – AND LIMBS.

# He's a Life Saver

Throwing a football with her brother Timmy one autumn afternoon three years ago, Eleanor Hahn felt a throbbing in her left arm. She initially dismissed it as growing pains.

When the sensation did not subside after a month, the Glen Rock High School sophomore began seeing doctors. Ultimately it was James Wittig '90, chief of orthopedic oncology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, who delivered the dreaded diagnosis: sarcoma, a rare type of cancer.

"When I first heard 'malignant tumor,' I felt like the walls were caving in on me because I believed cancer was a death sentence," said Hahn, now 17 and a freshman at Saint Michael's College in Vermont.

Knowing that reaction all too well, Dr. Wittig gave Hahn time to regain her composure and then reassured her she had a better-than-good chance of surviving.

"He speaks straight with you but in a very compassionate way," said the girl's mother, Lisa, recalling that office visit. "From the moment you meet him, he's so human you just believe what he's telling you. And he gave us his cell phone number!"

That number proved a lifeline during the eight months of chemotherapy that bracketed surgery replacing Hahn's upper arm bone with metal. Marking the second anniversary of the end of treatments last July with another card of thanks to Dr. Wittig, Hahn remarked, "There's really nothing I can't do."

Dr. Wittig, 42, has built a career on trying to save lives and limbs. As recently as 10 years ago, treating bone cancers and other sarcomas frequently meant amputation.

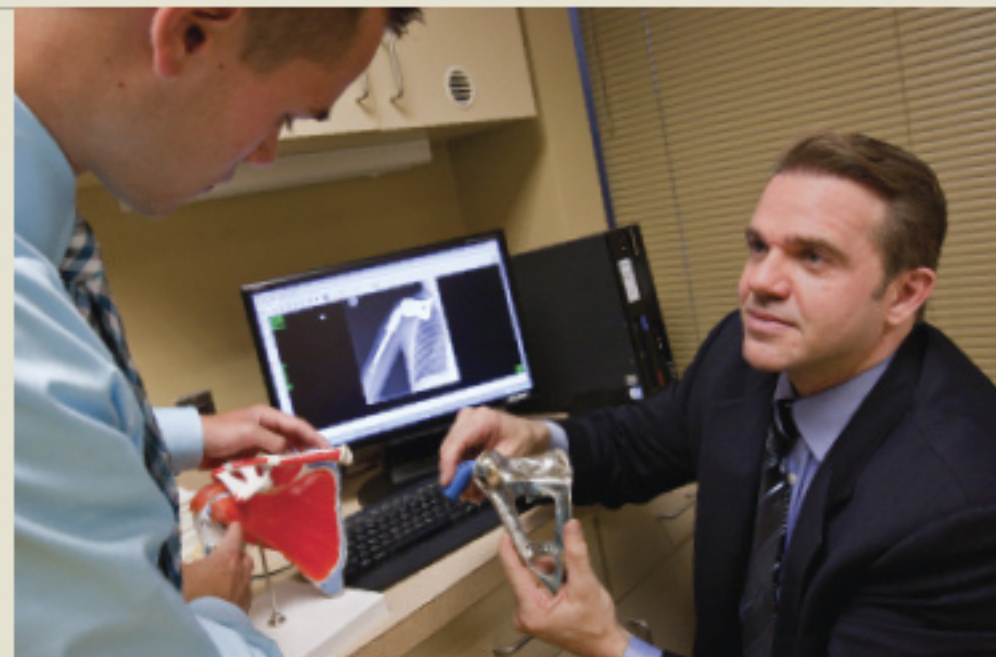
"Jim's surgical techniques are really cutting-edge in treating bone cancer," said Evan L. Flatow, Lasker chief

of shoulder surgery at Mount Sinai's Leni and Peter W. May Department of Orthopedic Surgery.

"Most do one-year fellowships but Jim did two, training not only in orthopedic, but also learning vascular and plastic surgery techniques so he could bring all those disciplines to bear in saving and rebuilding limbs," Flatow said.

With sarcomas comparatively rare — about 8,000 of the 1.2 million cancers diagnosed annually in the U.S. — Dr. Wittig is among about 150 orthopedic oncologists who specialize in treating them, performing 300 to 350 surgeries a year.

In 2009 and again this year, *New York* magazine named him as one of its best doctors and top 50 orthopedic surgeons in the metropolitan area. He also maintains offices in



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Morristown and at Hackensack University Medical Center, where he is chief of orthopedic oncology and director of the cancer center's sarcoma section.

Dr. Wittig began carrying a doctor's bag at age 2 while growing up in Paterson, N.J., where his father, James, is the police chief. "I must have had a good experience with a pediatrician — and my mother, Judith, said 'you're going to be a doctor,'" he said.

This conviction grew at Seton Hall, where he served as a health center aide and began turning up in the lab of Roberta Moldow, professor of biological sciences. "He was an outstanding student with a lot of potential," she said, recalling one summer when Dr. Wittig tutored members of the basketball team and worked in the lab.

"It takes a very special kind of person to deal with people with cancer," said Moldow.

"Telling a parent their kid has cancer is probably the hardest thing in the world and he spends a lot of time when he has to do that," she said. Some 40 percent of Dr. Wittig's patients are children.

**This summer,** Jim Wittig mentored Richard Greendyk, (above, on left) a sophomore biology major, through the Seton Hall pre-medical/pre-dental alumni mentoring program.

The doctors and dentists who participate in the program offer students advice about medical or dental schools and possible career choices. They provide work or "shadowing" opportunities in their hospitals or practices and hold informal seminars on the latest medical or dental techniques.

If you would like to learn more about joining the program, contact Roberta Moldow, Ph.D., at [roberta.moldow@shu.edu](mailto:roberta.moldow@shu.edu).

Dr. Wittig focused on his specialty while attending New York University School of Medicine. He served a rotation on an orthopedic surgery service at Bellevue and NYU hospitals and honed his skills during his residency at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. Next came the two-year fellowship at Washington Hospital Center and the National Institutes of Health.

In 2008, as Mount Sinai was expanding its cancer center, Flatow said he wanted to recruit the "absolute top person in orthopedic oncology, so I naturally came after Jim." He had known Dr. Wittig since the 1990s, when he was a resident.

With most doctors screening calls through answering services, Dr. Wittig's accessibility by cell phone is unusual but not surprising, said Flatow. "Jim was always an amazing guy; hard-working, honest and a very compassionate physician."

Colleague Andrew L. Pecora '79, chairman and executive administrative director of the John Theurer Cancer Center at Hackensack University Medical Center, recalled a patient they shared and who questioned whether another surgeon might be more suitable.

"I reassured him Dr. Wittig was outstanding but Dr. Wittig encouraged him to see the surgeon at the other center. The patient went and realized Dr. Wittig made him much more comfortable and came back," Pecora said. "That's emblematic of how he puts the interests of patients before himself." ■

*Al Frank '72/M.A. '10 is an adjunct professor at Seton Hall and a writer based in Parsippany, N.J. Photos by Peter Field Peck*