

HEALTH

UF teacher chronicles cancer fight

■ 'Not As I Pictured,' 10 p.m. Thursday, WLRN, Channel 17

BY JON SILMAN
 jsilman@miamiherald.com

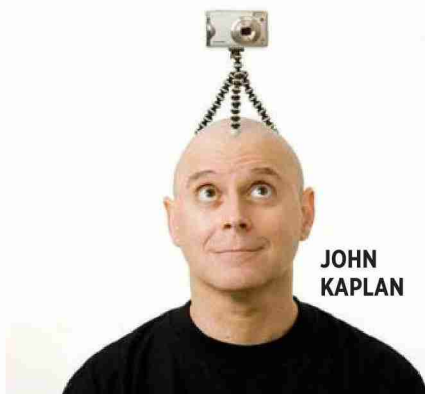
Every day is a blessing. Every day is a gift. Those words, repeated daily, got Pulitzer Prize winning photographer and now documentary filmmaker John Kaplan, 52, through the most difficult time of his life.

The University of Florida photojournalism professor went to the doctor for a routine cat scan for a hernia, but the test revealed something more sinister — a tumor on his kidney. In surgery, it got even worse. What was supposed to be an in and out procedure to remove the tumor revealed he actually had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of lymphoid tissue.

"It was out of the blue," Kaplan said. "When you first hear the sinister word [cancer] it tears through you like a knife wound."

Kaplan's movie about his

• TURN TO CANCER, 2E



journey with the C-word is called *Not as I Pictured*. The film has been well received by critics and won two prestigious CINE Golden Eagle Awards and several Best Documentary film festival awards. In South Florida, it airs at 10 p.m. Thursday on WLRN.

As a young man, Kaplan always had an interest in photography. His first published photo was of a car that had crashed into a Seven-Eleven when he was 15, in a paper in Delaware, where he grew up. He attended Ohio University. He won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of photos on a variety of 21-year-olds in strikingly different circumstances. He has worked for Life magazine. Now, he teaches at UF in Gainesville.

His passion for photography led him to the mirror one day: He decided to take a picture of himself during his treatment.

"I began taking pictures quite accidentally as a way to cope with my fear," he said, "I hoped that the work I was doing could truly help other families facing cancer."

The picture itself is stark and telling — his chest is half shaved, and he looks grizzled and weary. It's uncomfortably honest, as are most of the photos from the series, but also resilient.

"It's like the veneer is slipped away and you're suddenly faced with what's important in life," he said. "You replace fear with belief and sheer will."

That's the message Kaplan wants to get across with the

film. Cancer is tough, yes, but it doesn't mean the end.

"You can't just instantly will yourself a positive attitude," he said. "But if you're armed with the knowledge that most cancers are beatable you can begin the path to your recovery."

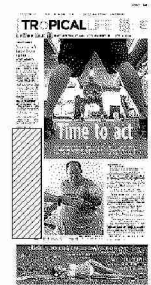
One of the most telling photographs in the series is of Kaplan lying on his stomach in a hospital bed, face twisted in what can only be described as obvious pain. It was one of two bone marrow biopsy procedures in which they shove a needle into a patient's lower back without anesthesia. Kaplan said he's never been shot by a gun, but he imagines that the procedure feels similar to it.

Through all the pain and all the uncertainty, he tried his best to stay positive. He kept teaching and living his life. He kept doing the things he loved to do.

Currently, he loves that the film is reaching an audience of so many people. And in fact, he's giving it away to anyone who has recently been touched by, or dealt with, cancer — on the film's website, notasipictured.org. So far, he has given away 45,000 copies of the movie.

It has been a few months since his last treatment, November of last year, actually. And of course he's grateful. The positive attitude he held on to helped him get through, and he wants to share that message.

"I don't dwell on the possibility that cancer could return one day," he said, "I just live life with joy and passion and I'm so grateful for all the help I received along the way."





SEE THE FILM: John Kaplan's movie, "Not as I Pictured," airs at 10 p.m. Thursday on WLRN, channel 17. Pictured here are scenes from the film.

