

## TELEVISION

# Photojournalist shoots own cancer fight

By Jeffrey Sheban  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Storytelling has long been in the blood of photojournalist John Kaplan.

Cancer joined the party late. His battle with — and ultimate triumph over — a potentially deadly form of lymphoma provides the basis for a new documentary in which the Ohio University graduate and Pulitzer Prize winner chronicles his diagnosis and treatment.

Two years in the making, *Not as I Pictured* will be shown at 11:30 p.m. Sunday and 2 a.m. next Friday on WOSU-TV (Channel 34) — as part of a national **While losing his hair because of chemotherapy, John Kaplan has his head shaved in front of his wife and children.** distribution on public-TV stations.

Kaplan, a 52-year-old who teaches journalism at the University of Florida, made the 54-minute film, he said, both to offer therapy for himself and to educate and encourage cancer patients and their families.

"The whole process began purely as a way to cope with my fear, and, for me, it's been an

See **CANCER** Page **D2** absolute part of my healing," said Kaplan, who earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at OU.

The story begins in 2008 with the father of two, 48 at the time, undergoing what he expected to be routine treatment for a small hernia. A preoperative CT scan also revealed a tumor on his right kidney that his doctor hoped could be removed during a single operation.

Once inside, his surgeon realized that the situation was more complicated: Kaplan was afflicted with

non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of lymphatic and white-blood-cell cancer that had metastasized in his right lower abdomen and on the kidney as well as in his bone marrow.

A new set of doctors determined that treatment would involve another surgery, to remove the kidney tumor, and 14 rounds of chemotherapy during two years.

The diagnosis, Kaplan said, "completely blindsided" him.

"Before I got sick, I never thought about cancer," he said. "Then and now, all I could think of was: Will I be around to see my kids?"

Early in the process — after the second surgery and at the beginning of his chemotherapy treatments — Kaplan was standing in front of his full-length bathroom mirror gazing at his partially shaved torso and pulling out clumps of his long black hair.

Holding his camera over his head, he shot a picture of himself in the mirror that would inspire him to chronicle his medical journey. The decision proved therapeutic.

"I had the will to beat it," he said.

After graduating from OU in 1982, Kaplan worked for various newspapers and magazines, and on special projects.

In 1992, he won a Pulitzer for feature photography for a series of photo essays depicting how 21-year-olds lived throughout the United States. All the essays were published by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, owned by Block Communications

— with some published in the chain's other papers, including *The Blade* of Toledo. He has been a professor at Florida for 13 years.

The documentary is roughly half video and half still photos. Kaplan shot most of the footage, either holding the camera or using a combination of mirrors, timers and remote controls. Friends helped shoot the footage in which Kaplan appears on-screen.

The soundtrack contains music donated for use by David Bowie, Coldplay, Cowboy Junkies, Pantera and R.E.M.

*Not as I Pictured*, which ends with the news of Kaplan's remission and return to good health, has won two CINE Golden Eagle Awards and several best-documentary honors. Reviewers have called it uplifting and moving.

"It's not a dark and gloomy cancer story," said WOSU Program Director Stacia Hentz. "There are moments that are difficult, but Kaplan's approach is to push through it, just like any difficult event in life."

Through financial support from the Enlight Foundation and American Society of Clinical Oncology, Kaplan hopes to distribute 10,000 DVDs of the film free to cancer patients — along with a 16-page educational booklet, available on request at [www.notasipictured.org](http://www.notasipictured.org).

Kaplan hopes that the documentary illustrates there's plenty of life to be lived during and after cancer treatment.

"You can find your way



back to health and back to joy every day," he said. "A few years ago, I'd never say that cancer could be a blessing, but so many

positive things have come out of it.

"It's clarifying, in a good way."

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**JOHN KAPLAN**  
cancer survivor



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