

“They Said I’d Likely Be Gone In 15 Months.”

For two weeks in the fall of 2006, Mary Wong Lee of San Dimas, California, had been plagued by on-and-off headaches, but when words began escaping her the 55-year-old office manager got worried. “I’d be writing letters or reports and know I wanted to say ‘appreciate’ or ‘opportunity,’ but couldn’t think how to spell them,” she says. She told her longtime general practitioner, who sent her for an MRI. About a week later Lee stopped by his office to say she’d gotten the test. “Let me call and see if they have the results yet,” he said. “His side of the conversation got quiet and then he left the room,” Lee says. “When he came back he had tears in his eyes.”

Lee had glioblastoma multiforme, one of the most aggressively malignant types of brain cancer. “It’s a formidable enemy,” says Keith L. Black, M.D., director of the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, where Lee was referred. “Most of the time we lose the battle.” Even with standard treatment she’d likely be dead in 15 months. Dr. Black immediately scheduled surgery to take out a golfball-size tumor in Lee’s brain, keeping her conscious and asking her questions during parts of the procedure to avoid cutting areas that controlled her speech.

After surgery, Lee’s headaches disappeared and her speech improved. She waited three months to recuperate before starting chemo and radiation treatments. But her prognosis was still grim. Glioblastoma tumors usually



MARY WONG LEE
Survived an aggressive brain tumor

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return with a vengeance only months later. “It’s like an infection that you only treat partially with weak antibiotics,” Dr. Black says. “It comes back even worse.” Lee was holding up well, though, so Dr. Black proposed an experimental vaccine he was testing. “There were no promises, but what did I have to lose?” Lee says. Tailor-made to individual patients and their cancers, the treatment removed specialized white cells from Lee’s blood and exposed them in the lab to cells from her tumor. Like sentries that have been given an exact picture of an enemy infiltrator, the white blood cells were then put back into her body, where it was hoped they’d recognize the can-



cer and mobilize the immune system's army to kill it.

That was more than four years ago. Without that treatment Lee's odds of surviving this long would normally have narrowed to 3 percent. "We have to be realistic," Dr. Black says. "We don't believe we've cured her. But we've had patients go seven, eight, nine years with this vaccine. And our hope is to give her the next-generation vaccine we're working on now." Lee is making the most of the time she has. Her main joys are spending time with her family and friends—cooking or golfing with her husband, Edward, and two grown sons, knitting, playing bridge—and working on the board of National Urban Fellows, a nonprofit that develops leadership among women and minorities. "Whether I live four years or 15, I have no control," Lee says. "I'm just happy I woke up this morning. My attitude has always been to enjoy each day."