

Mountaineer Rob Mahedy Finds New Sense of Community Through Bladder Cancer Journey

Among those helping Mahedy were Colorado University Cancer Center members Laura Graham, MD, and Janet Kukreja, MD.

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Living alone in a small cabin in Crested Butte, Colorado, and doing solo climbs of mountains around the world any chance he got, Rob Mahedy had gotten pretty used to being on his own.

In fact, he preferred it that way.

Then he was diagnosed with [bladder cancer](#), and everything changed.

“You realize how much people really want to help — it helps people to help others,” says Mahedy, 59. “A big part of my journey with cancer was to ask for help and to accept help. Medicine and surgeries were a major part of it, but there’s this whole other inspiration of love and humanity that has helped me cope and have a positive attitude.”

Symptoms lead to treatment

Mahedy was first helped by doctors and a urologist at a medical center in Gunnison, where he went in late 2024 after seeing blood in his urine and feeling an increased urgency to urinate. An ultrasound and cystoscopy revealed a large tumor in his bladder, and he was referred to the [University of Colorado Anschutz Cancer Center](#).

There, Mahedy was seen at the bladder cancer [multidisciplinary clinic](#), which brings specialists from different areas together to examine a patient and come up with a treatment plan, all on the same day.

Cancer center member [Laura Graham](#), MD, put Mahedy on a twelve-week course of chemotherapy to shrink the tumor in advance of surgery; he then received a radical cystectomy — surgery to remove the bladder, the same procedure undergone by [CU Buffaloes coach Deion Sanders](#) — from cancer center member [Janet Kukreja](#), MD, a national leader in robotic bladder surgery. It was

discovered that the cancer had spread to multiple lymph nodes at the time of surgery, and those were removed as well.

“Hearing that my cancer was quite aggressive and had a good chance of spreading through my body — I felt fearful, but I didn’t go down the rabbit hole of doing too much Google research,” he says. “I just put my trust in Dr. Kukreja and Dr. Graham. And I got to a point of acceptance within a couple of weeks.”

Two months later, his cancer recurred in his lungs.

“Chemotherapy and surgery all went as well as we could have hoped for, but cancer can be really frustrating,” Graham says. “We put Rob on a combination of an immunotherapy and an antibody drug conjugate — a now-standard treatment that was partially the result of a [clinical trial](#) we had open here several years ago — and he had a beautiful response.”

Asking for help

Throughout his initial treatment and his infusions of the two-drug combination every other week, Mahedy continued to reach out for help, primarily through two cancer support groups in Gunnison County: [Living Journeys](#) and [Gunnison Tough](#).

“Gunnison Tough started as a breast cancer support organization then expanded,” he says. “They have a fleet of five vehicles that I use to come down to CU Anschutz, and they’ll even pay for hotel or gas. Living Journeys does the same. They’ll bring food to your house, they have volunteers who will come and clean your house — these two organizations have been a major source of strength for me.”

On the climb

Mahedy continued to follow his passion for climbing during his treatment, taking a break from the infusions in July 2025 to climb Mount Hayes in Alaska. In preparation, and to practice using his artificial bladder in extreme mountain conditions, he got help from yet another source — famed Colorado climber Eric Larsen, who underwent his own battle with colorectal cancer in 2021, as he [shared with the Colorado Sun in 2022](#).

“He has to give himself enemas to go to the bathroom every morning, using warm water, and I have this freezing issue with my bag when I’m in a tent and it’s five below, or maybe even lower,” Mahedy says. “I had to figure out how to keep it warm, how to attach it properly so I don’t spill, because getting wet can be very dangerous when you’re winter camping. So I practiced with Eric, and we were both joking and making fun of ourselves dealing with these bodily fluids.”

A few months after that climb, Mahedy got another bout of bad news — scans showed that there

were remaining cancer cells in his lungs. Graham prescribed targeted radiation therapy, but first, Mahedy had another climb to make, this one in Nepal.

“I told them I wanted to go over and climb in the Himalayas, and they said that should work out fine,” Mahedy remembers. “They said, ‘Let’s let that tumor grow a little bit.’ It was a quarter inch, and they said they had a better chance of hitting with the radiation if it gets up to half an inch.”

So with his doctors’ blessing, Mahedy took another break from the infusions to go to Nepal, where he spent 40 days climbing Ama Dablam.

“I got as high as 21,000 feet, and I felt pretty darn good,” he says. “Some people say Ama Dablam is the most beautiful mountain on the planet, and it’s highly technical. It’s harder than Mount Everest, but it has less people. That’s what I like.”

Mahedy and the two friends he brought with him were welcomed by the Sherpa community in Nepal; Mahedy also got some unexpected support from a fellow climber from Ireland.

“I met this guy two years ago in Nepal, and he found me on Facebook and said, ‘I saw one of your posts, and I got inspired by your story. My company is going to sponsor me to come to Nepal and climb the peak you climbed in 2023 to raise money for cancer research.’

“He said, ‘I would love to see you,’ and as we were coming down from the mountain, he messaged me and said, ‘I flew in from London to Kathmandu, I started hiking last night, and I’m in a little town called Monjo.’ And I said, ‘Are you kidding me? We just got into Monjo.’ We met up and took pictures together. That was a whole loving shot in the arm for me.”

Continuing treatment and helping others

After the Nepal trip, Mahedy returned to Colorado and received radiation therapy for the cancer in his lungs. He continues to get infusions of the immunotherapy drug every six weeks — Graham removed the antibody drug conjugate because of its side effects.

Mahedy now works with Living Journeys and Gunnison Tough to help other people through their cancer journeys. Once wary of asking for help, he now knows how vital it can be.

“My oncologist in Montrose was very frank with me when I started treatment there,” Mahedy says. “He said, ‘You have a 40% chance of surviving five years.’ So given that diagnosis, I said, ‘I’m going to be in that 40%. I’m going to make it and take that attitude and keep living my life and then see what I can do to give back a bit.’ There’s been this whole transformation in my life of what’s important.

“I’m not just surviving,” he says. “I think I’m thriving.”

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