

BY KIRSTEN BICKFORD

PHOTO BY EMILY NATHAN

**When brain surgery turned a bleak two-weeks-to-live diagnosis into hope, Cristina Schott and her husband were given some of their most memorable time together.**

# The Gift of Another Year

California's Napa Valley, where Cristina Schott makes her home, offers some of the loveliest views in the world. Vineyard rows blanket the valley floor and follow the contours of wooded hills. In the spring, a swarm of yellow mustard blooms among the grapevines, and autumn brings a palette of russets and golds. But when your husband is suddenly diagnosed with a fatal brain tumor, it doesn't matter where you live. What you see is the dead-end view that such news always brings—you see only the landscape of fear.

Cristina endured a devastating loss when her husband of 32 years, Peter Schott, passed away in 2007. But along the way, the couple also experienced hope and an extra year of life for Peter when their path led them to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and Dr. Keith Black.

In August 2006, the Schotts were about to take a cruise along the Dalmatian coast with a dozen friends to celebrate Pete's 65th birthday. In the weeks before, he had stumbled a few times into things he hadn't noticed. A checkup at the eye doctor and an MRI revealed he had a large brain tumor. "Get your affairs in order and take the cruise," his physician advised. "Have as good a time as you can, because you have about two weeks to live."

In numb despair, the Schotts continued with their travel plans without telling their friends the tragic news. The following day, on their way to catch an afternoon flight to Croatia, they received a call from Keith L. Black, MD, chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Cedars-Sinai, to whom they had been referred for a second opinion. Although he was on vacation himself and had not yet seen Peter's MRI, Dr. Black recommended they put their trip on hold—there would be plenty of time to travel once they got matters under control.

"It was such a ray of hope!" Cristina says now. She still marvels at the calm efficiency of Dr. Black and his team. "My best guess is it's a glioblastoma," he said, identifying a stage four, aggressively growing brain tumor. He talked about new treatment options but said they wouldn't know anything certain until he could operate. "Immediately we knew he was fantastic—and we hadn't even seen the medical side of his true capabilities! He has a vision of what true healthcare should be," Cristina explains. The Schotts canceled their flight and pondered this new chance at life for Peter.

Cristina is a darkly attractive woman whose life force and positive glow exceed her compact frame. "Pete was incredibly creative," she remembers now. "I was the yin to his yang. He was the passionate one, and I was the voice of practicality." The two first met in 1973 at IBM where Cristina was a young trainee out of graduate school and Peter was a senior systems engineer. Two years later the couple married. For the next 25 years, the Schotts' work in the high-tech field took them from Honolulu to Silicon Valley, Dallas and back to the San Francisco area. In 1989 the Schotts bought a weekend place in the wine country, and it became their oasis after a long week of work.

Cristina grins whenever she talks about her late husband. "Everybody liked Pete," she says. "He always had an impish smile and a twinkle in his eye." Once retired, they moved to Napa full time; Peter was soon pursuing his passion for great wine by making it at home with friends. It wasn't long before he had started a small winery and eventual distribution company, Wine by the Schott. "Pete was chasing his

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—CRISTINA SCHOTT,  
PHOTOGRAPHED WITH HER DOG PHOEBE IN THE SCENIC  
VINEYARD OF MONT LA SALLE IN NAPA, CALIFORNIA

dream,” Cristina says. Then came the fatal diagnosis.

Dr. Black was able to remove the entire tumor and, with an aggressive treatment of radiation and chemotherapy, kept Pete’s cancer at bay for another full year. Once diagnosed, the median survival rate for glioblastoma patients is 15 months, and few live more than two years.

“We knew it wasn’t a matter of if, but when,” Cristina says. In Peter’s last year, they never made it to Croatia, but spent every available moment together, with family and friends. “It was our little daily adventures together that were most special, like just going out to have a drink together and coming home for dinner. I will forever be grateful for that extra year and that’s what I miss the most.”

It is telling that, despite the difficult circumstances surrounding their relationship, Cristina feels only gratitude and admiration for Dr. Black and his team. Why was he able to extend hope and time when other doctors offered such bleak diagnoses? “Most neurosurgeons are really spine surgeons for whom intracranial disorders represent only a tiny fraction of their practice,” Black explains. “Here we have a comprehensive center exclusively dedicated to helping people with devastating brain disorders.”

Today, Cristina is single-handedly running Wine by the Schott and is an active board member for the Lasallian Education Fund, which provides educational funding for children in severe poverty. She made a generous bequest to support the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute at Cedars-Sinai, of which Dr. Black is the director. A bequest is a testamentary gift that is written into the donor’s will or revocable trust. Cristina’s legacy gift will help to improve the chances for future brain-tumor



patients with new treatments and clinical trials.

A breast-cancer survivor herself, Cristina chose instead to support brain cancer research because “other cancers are more visible and well-funded.” She adds: “Brain cancer is on the rise and has farther to go with research. When you invest in an organization, you want to make sure it has a chance of success. Having seen the caliber of Dr. Black’s work, I believe he’s already at the forefront in making major advances against this disease.”

For Dr. Black, the best part of his job is “the chance to make a difference and caring for people like Peter and Cristina. The support and love they shared during his illness was very important to his well-being.” During his treatment, Peter had given Dr. Black a few bottles of Schott wine. About six months after Peter’s death, Dr. Black brought the wine on his own trip to Croatia, toasting the Schotts from the place they were headed when their real journey began. ■