'Real fighter' Koch faces his toughest battle: cancer

By Rick A. Mazza
Tribune reporter

Ron Koch is a champion as he manages the boxing career of a two-time world titleholder from Albuquerque.

In the courtroom, he is one of the city's most successful defense attorneys, working and winning several high-profile cases.

But right now, Koch is facing the biggest battle of his life in a Tucson hospital room, and friends and family say they're confident Koch will once again prevail.

Koch, 49, has been undergoing aggressive procedures this week to treat a serious cancer that attacks lymph nodes.

"We always used to say that he's the best fighter on our team," said Dan Romero Sr., father of boxer Danny Romero and a close friend of Koch's for more than 20 years. "He'll pull through this."

Koch had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosed several months ago. He began chemotherapy treatments last spring, causing his skin to turn yellow, his hair to fall out and his weight to drop by about 90 pounds.

The treatments were unsuccessful.

Koch made a temporary move to Arizona 1 1/2 weeks ago to undergo a specialized blood transplant that isn't performed here, and is only performed about 3,000 times a year across the country.

Koch spent the early part of this week undergoing complete body radiation at University Medical Center in Tucson to kill all of the blood cells in his body. On Thursday, his body was filled with blood from his sister, Debbie Manchester, who was a near-perfect transfusion match for Koch.

Now, Koch must spend the next four to six weeks in his hospital room. Doctors say because Koch's immune system might be especially susceptible to infection, his family -- wife, Yvonne, and three children -- had to stay behind in Albuquerque while Koch recovers.

"I feel very assured that he's going to do fine," Manchester said earlier this week. "There's just a calm feeling around this."

Koch has built a prominent reputation for himself in nearly 25 years of practicing law in Albuquerque. He has defended high-profile

members of the community, such as the Rev. Sabine Griego, former priest Jason Sigler, and local TV and radio personality Henry Tafoya. He also tried high-profile murder cases involving the homicides of Linda Lee Daniels and, more recently, Girly Hossencofft.

"He has always been a very, very fine defense attorney," says Chief Deputy District Attorney Pete Dinelli. "He has always been a strong advocate for his clients, extremely professional. He's a real fighter."

Says state Chief District Judge W. John Brennan: "He certainly has the reputation as one of the best criminal defense attorneys. He always does an excellent job, and he's a great orator."

But it's outside of the courtroom where Koch is most exemplary, say close friends.

"Ron is a people person," says Steve Long, a longtime friend who practices in the same Downtown office as Koch. "Ron just loves talking to people. He takes a genuine interest in people."

He took a strong interest in the career and life of his friend Romero Sr.'s son. Shortly after Danny Romero started boxing professionally six years ago, Koch began working as his manager.

"He's like a second father to me," Romero said last month. "He has always (been) willing to do anything for me."

Romero Sr. said as Koch's condition has changed, his son has ridden the same emotional roller coaster.

"We're just taking this really hard," Romero Sr. said. "Everything is on hold right now. We're waiting for Ron. We don't want to do anything without him."

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is not an especially common type of cancer, affecting fewer than 3 out of 10,000 people. It most often affects people more than 50 years old and has about a 30 percent cure rate.

Manchester, who was treated earlier this week with shots that helped her bone marrow produce an exceptionally high rate of blood cells, said that after Thursday's transfusion, doctors will have to take a wait-and-see approach.

"There's a couple things that can happen now," she says. "Hopefully, everything goes smoothly. But his body can attack my cells and not accept them, or my cells can attack his body. Doctors will be watching very carefully.

"We're very optimistic. It's not always fun to look at the bigger picture because that's pretty overwhelming. But we're just trying to focus on one day at a time."

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