Anthony Bookman: Breathing new life

Anthony Bookman was always a man on the move.

As chief cook at Columbia’s Fort Jackson, he directed a team that served 2,800 meals per day, 365 days a year, and then managed a Bi-Lo bakery team.

But all of that changed after two bouts with non-small cell lung cancer, which prompted the complete removal of his right lung as well as treatments with chemotherapy, radiation and ablation.

Bookman, like many lung cancer survivors, suffered from debilitating shortness of breath. He was embarrassed about his symptoms, and the simple act of getting dressed each day left him exhausted and frustrated.

Worn down by the disease he had conquered, Bookman lived his life primarily as a shut-in, venturing from his home once per week for worship.

He was intrigued by the chance to participate in Breathe Easier, a clinical research study at the University of South Carolina College of Nursing. This eight-week program, designed by assistant professor Karen McDonnell, teaches breathing exercises, meditation and mindfulness to lung cancer patients and their designated support person, such as a spouse, sibling, child or friend. For the study, Bookman and his pastor joined 23 other pairs for two hours each Thursday at a mindfulness studio where they shared their daily living challenges and learned new techniques, such as chair yoga poses, to improve their physical and mental health.

At home, Bookman practiced his exercises each day and logged his progress. He noticed that his lung capacity improved, and his oxygen use dropped. He continues to practice the skills he learned, such as pursed lip breathing, which helps him remain calm when he climbs stairs, quiet breathing and various stretches.

“The program taught us to slow down and appreciate the simple things we can do on our own,” he said. Beyond those skills, Bookman said meeting other survivors was invaluable because of the encouragement and perspective they offered. “Someone’s going to tell you about the rough time they had,” he said. “You realize you’re not as worse off as you could be.”

Bookman said he looked forward to the weekly sessions and began to think of life outside his house.

He leads a Bible study, delivers Meals on Wheels and is pursuing a part-time job — even as he faces another disease recurrence. “I’ve learned to expect more of myself than I did before I started the class,” he said. “It’s been fun to see myself improve, and I’m looking to do so much more.”

Breathe Easier was funded by a generous grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation.