From psoriasis to service

John Latella has been “through the wringer” in dealing with psoriasis. Now, he says, he’s come out “clean” and eager to help the world understand what it means to live with a severe case of the disease.

Diagnosed with psoriasis in 1964 at age 22, John tried the few treatments available at the time—mostly tar-based ointments—but his skin continued to worsen. Over the years, he developed various forms of the disease including plaque-type, nail, guttate psoriasis and even one painful bout with erythrodermic psoriasis, which exposes the innermost layer of skin. In 1976, John was also diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, a degenerative joint condition that affects as many as 30 percent of people with psoriasis.

From extensive ultraviolet-B light treatments to vitamin D analog ointments, John continued to try new treatments as they emerged. In 2005, he started taking shots of a biologic medication once a week. Within a few months, his skin was nearly 100 percent clear for the first time in more than 40 years.

A year later, the psoriasis returned. Doctors switched him to a different biologic drug and his skin has been clear since.

With a career in sales, John had never shied away from the spotlight. Nonetheless, it had been difficult having to explain his condition again and again.

“I just feel clean,” he says now. “The barber would never shave me before, because I had so many scales on my hairline. People started noticing (when) I was wearing short-sleeved shirts. It changes your whole disposition.”

Always active in the psoriasis community, John devotes much of his time in retirement to educating others about psoriatic disease. He speaks to everyone from legislators to pharmaceutical scientists about the importance of research and new treatments.

“When my wife and I gave a presentation to about 70 scientists, we opened their eyes to living with psoriasis on a daily basis,” he says of a recent experience. “I represented everyone who has psoriasis, and gave them a face to think about instead of just petri dishes.

“I’d love to see more aggressive research into psoriasis and other autoimmune diseases, and I’d love to see the bigger picture—helping one autoimmune disease is going to help all the others.”