



Making the best of a cancer diagnosis

Mark and Violet Nicol have several philosophies they live by. One is to *take things day by day*. Another, that *everything happens for a reason*. And, *it's not the destination, it's the journey*. All of these helped the area couple through the most difficult times.

A Grafton native, Violet, 44, took a job transfer to Dubuque, Iowa. There she married Mark Nicol. Eight years later, Violet transferred back to the Milwaukee area. It was the transfer back that Violet says saved her life.

While living in Dubuque, Violet was diagnosed with uterine fibroids, or tumors made of muscle cells and tissues that grow within and around the wall of the uterus. While fibroids are the most common tumors in women, they rarely develop into cancer. "The typical course of treatment is to watch the fibroid," said Dr. Susan Kroener, an OB/GYN on staff at Community Memorial Hospital and Medical Associates Health Center. Medication can be used to shrink the fibroid, and surgery is only necessary if it causes discomfort, enlarges rapidly or causes heavy bleeding.

For two years the physicians in

Dubuque watched the fibroid. "The fibroid didn't bother me, but I could feel it when I lay down," said Violet. When it came time for her annual health exam after she relocated to Germantown, Violet saw Dr. Kroener. "The first thing I told her was I have this lump and I'd like you to tell me what it is," said Violet. Dr. Kroener's diagnosis was the same: uterine fibroids. "However, based on my initial work up and physical exam, I recommended a hysterectomy," she said. "I found the fibroid to be larger than what her documentation from Dubuque showed."

The diagnosis.

Surgery was scheduled for late July of 2006. Just days before, Violet experienced severe bleeding. "I was scared, really scared," said Violet. "The bleeding persisted and Violet's surgery was moved up. Dr. Kroener removed a fibroid that was roughly six inches by six inches. Following standard procedure, the fibroid was sent to pathology and tested for cancer cells. Unexpectedly, the results came back positive. Violet had a rare cancer called leiomyosarcoma.

"We both were shocked," said Dr. Kroener. "It was an unexpected finding. Violet's on the young side for this to happen." Leiomyosarcoma is a cancer of the soft muscle tissue found in the uterus. It can also be found in the stomach, intestines, walls of all blood vessels and skin. Violet was referred to Denise Uyar, gynecologic oncologist with the Medical College of Wisconsin and on staff at Community Memorial. "Uterine sarcoma is a fairly uncommon cancer that can be aggressive," said Dr. Uyar. "It accounts for less than five percent of uterine cancers."

The treatment.

Leiomyosarcoma has a recurrence rate of 50 percent within the first two years. With that in mind, Dr. Uyar and Dr. Patrick Tripp, a radiation oncologist with the Medical College of Wisconsin, recommended an aggressive treatment of radiation, followed by five rounds of chemotherapy. Violet's chemotherapy treatment was performed under the direction of Antony Ruggeri, MD, an oncologist at Community Memorial Hospital's Cancer Care Center and with Oncology Alliance.

For 25 days in the fall of 2006, Violet and Mark came to the Cancer Care Center at Community Memorial Hospital to receive radiation treatments to her abdomen. “We believe everything happens for a reason,” Violet said. “Mark had been in Dubuque recovering from rotator cuff surgery and trying to sell our house. He had just moved up here before the radiation began and hadn’t found a job yet.”

His job, he added, was to take care of his wife. He attended every radiation and chemotherapy treatment with her. He cut her hair when it began falling out, and tried to maintain a normal routine at home. Soon, he would be taking Violet to physical therapy as she recovered from another health issue.

A secondary diagnosis.

During chemotherapy which followed radiation, Violet began to gain weight and her legs became swollen and painful. Dr. Uyar suspected Violet was suffering from lymphedema and referred her to the Lymphedema Program at Community Memorial Hospital. The lymphatic system carries fluid, foreign debris, viruses and waste products from the tissues. Lymphedema occurs when there is a build up of fluid in the lymph vessels and nodes. Radiation, surgery, trauma or infection can affect the flow of lymph fluid in the arms, legs or trunk causing the excess fluid to build up, resulting in swelling. Treatment is performed by a specially trained physical or occupational therapist and includes massage, specialized bandaging and the use of compression garments.

Community Memorial Hospital’s Physical Medicine department has six physical and occupational therapists trained to treat lymphedema. “Radiation can traumatize the lymphatic vessels,” said Leigh Beyer, one of Violet’s physical therapists. “A healthy person’s lymphatic system has the capacity to handle extra fluid in the body. In a compromised person, the body doesn’t have that ability. The lymph nodes become overloaded and fluid starts to back up. That’s what causes the swelling, pain and a heavy, tight or tingling feeling.”

Specialized lymphatic massage helps to soften the tissue and move the fluid. Using compression bandages or garments helps support the tissues to prevent further build up of fluid. “Violet responded really well to the treatment,” said Leigh. “She followed her home program instructions. She was a self-advocate. She asked a lot of questions and was motivated to return to her exercise regime.”

Leigh also incorporated treatment to break up the scar tissue that had developed in Violet’s abdomen. Violet began treatment with Leigh in the spring and completed her therapy in October. “The lymphedema could be an issue for the rest of my life,” said Violet, “but I’m aware of it and I’ll do whatever they tell me to do to take care of it.”



The future.

“When you get a scare like cancer, your priorities change,” said Mark. Chores and to-do lists used to come first. Now a ride on a sunny afternoon takes precedence. “We’re continuing on our journey,” said Violet. “There are a lot of curves in our journey, but we’ll get the road straightened out. We just take it one day at a time and enjoy each other.”



Susan Kroener, MD



Denise Uyar, MD



Patrick Tripp, MD



Antony Ruggeri, MD