

Colorectal Cancer Patient has Fighting Spirit

August 13, 2019

Lisa Demaree does not sit idle. So when physicians diagnosed her with [colon cancer](#) in July 2014, she stepped into the role of patient with the same energy she brings to her daily life.

“I was all in,” Lisa says. “There are some people who sincerely ask ‘why me’ when something like this happens, but I’ve never been one to have that conversation with myself, my family or my God. To me, no matter how terrifying or unfamiliar, this was another thing I was experiencing as part of my life, and so it was mine to own.”

Taking on colorectal cancer

Lisa was 45 years old when she was diagnosed and no stranger to taking an occasional leap of faith. She and her husband have cared for 79 foster children over the course of 25 years. They are parents to 8 adopted children and have weathered the usual ups and downs of life.

Adding to the flurry, Lisa’s voracious appetite to learn and live has led her down winding career paths. Her green thumb, artist’s instincts and quick intellect have fueled her careers as a florist, interior designer, artist, criminal supervision officer, lawyer, and clothing and jewelry store owner. Most recently, she has been the imagination behind Betty’s Angels – a nonprofit organization to help homeless children.

Her strength would be tested during her cancer journey.

Beginning the journey

In October 2013, Lisa slipped and fell at work. Thinking she had bruised or cracked her tailbone, she pushed through pain and discomfort for the next several months. When she began to see blood in her stool the following spring, Lisa scheduled an office visit but was not terribly concerned.

“I knew it was unusual, but was not thinking this was a red flag,” she recalls. “I was a healthy individual, and it is so easy to write off symptoms to any number of other conditions.”

Lisa had a colonoscopy, and things began to move quickly. The physician woke her up from the procedure and told her he thought she was looking at cancer. Bloodwork and a CT scan confirmed it, and Lisa was referred to The University of Kansas Cancer Center.

The diagnosis was stage 4 colon cancer. Lisa’s tumor was the size of an orange. A multidisciplinary tumor board met to discuss her case. These physicians quickly developed a treatment plan that would give her a fighting chance.

“There was a sense of urgency to everything,” Lisa says. “I went from colonoscopy to this with saving my life.”

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“Her tumor markers were stable after about 6 months of chemo, with no evidence of cancer progressing.

–Anup Kasi, MD
Medical oncologist

Fighting chance

Initial treatment involved 8 weeks of oral chemotherapy along with radiation therapy, followed by 6 weeks of rest. Next, Lisa met with [John Ashcraft, DO](#), a colorectal surgeon with the cancer center, to prepare for surgery. She would undergo a complex synchronous surgery – an intricate procedure performed by 2 surgical teams working together – to remove the tumor and reattach the remaining sections of the colon. The procedure would also include a full hysterectomy.

It was an intense start, but Lisa was thankful to be taking action, and she pushed through with her trademark spirit. Just 3 weeks after surgery, she hosted 30 people for Thanksgiving dinner.

“I don’t sit still long,” she jokes. “I move about 95 miles an hour. This was just half speed.”

Lisa received 2 more intense rounds of chemotherapy and a temporary ileostomy and a follow-up procedure to remove the ileostomy. By August 2015, her cancer numbers had normalized, noted [Anup Kasi, MD](#), medical oncologist with the cancer center. In January 2016, imaging showed that Lisa’s cancer had progressed in her abdominal lymph nodes. She and Dr. Kasi discussed the benefits of restarting chemotherapy, which she chose to do. Dr. Kasi said Lisa made the right decision because her cancer has had an excellent response to the chemotherapy.

"Her tumor markers were stable after about 6 months of chemo, with no evidence of cancer progressing, so we were able to give her a break from aggressive treatment and move her into what we call a maintenance chemo," he says. "This was great news for Lisa, and a good sign that her body was tolerating the treatment and doing the things it needed to do to fight through. Lisa is now on a pill-based maintenance chemo and enjoys a very good quality life."

A caring difference

Lisa was not a stranger to cancer treatment. Her father was treated for stage 4 lymphoma when she was little, and he passed away from a subsequent battle with leukemia 5 years ago. Her mother died from lung cancer when Lisa was 29. In each case, she remembers most the interactions with their care providers.

“I’ve sort of seen it all, as far as the spectrum of care,” she says. “I’ve seen the good, the bad and the ugly, you could say. From the moment my own treatment began, I can safely say I was in the best hands possible, receiving the kindest and most compassionate care every step of the way. It makes a world of difference.”

Lisa’s “can-do” attitude made a powerful impact of its own, notes Dr. Ashcraft.

“She is the only patient I’ve encountered who maintained an amazing attitude, literally every step of the way,” he says. “Instead of going through this dreading every phase of treatment, she was positive and kept herself busy. She has flown through treatment with the same attitude that she’s conquered other things with, and her recovery has been stronger as a result.”

Lisa will continue maintenance chemotherapy to keep her cancer at bay for as long as she keeps working.

That’s not to say she’ll be doing a lot of anxious waiting.

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enjoyed a bit early. Now, it’s a bustling home for a tight-knit family. Her nonprofit organization is growing larger each year. And she stays busy traveling, running competitively and keeping up with 8 children.

Her next endeavor? In the hustle and bustle of life, Lisa did not maintain her law licensure, so she is currently studying to take the bar exam again this summer.

“I’m grateful to those who used their knowledge and expertise to help me," she says. "I’d like to be able to do the same."

As with all treatments, individual patient results vary. It is important to discuss your treatment options with your healthcare provider.



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