

Survivor Spotlight



Windsu Kelly is a Birmingham resident and a surgical scrub nurse for UAB cardiac surgeon David McGiffin, M.D., in UAB Hospital's cardiovascular (CV) operating room. Here is the story of her experience with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Answers to a Prayer

During the summer of 2006, I noticed an enlarging lump on the left side of my neck. Being a registered nurse, I watched it for a few days thinking I had an enlarged lymph node due to an infection. I had no other symptoms, however, and the lump never decreased. I asked Dr. McGiffin to look at it one day after we had completed a case in

the operating room. He examined my neck and sent me to Marty Heslin, M.D., a UAB surgical oncologist who ordered a CT scan of my neck and chest. He discovered that I had not only a mass in my neck, but two masses in my anterior chest as well. After a biopsy, I was diagnosed on July 24, 2006, with Hodgkin's lymphoma. Like so many others, I was taken by surprise to find out I had a life-threatening disease. The only symptom I could identify was increased tiredness, which is such a subjective symptom. With the demanding schedule in the CV operating room, I really had not noticed a big difference in my stamina.

Once we knew it was not a cancer that could be surgically removed, my hematologist-oncologist, Andres Forero, M.D., quickly put me through a battery of tests and procedures. He was very informative and eager to determine what stage the cancer had progressed to and begin a treatment plan. I met with him on a Thursday afternoon, and the very next day I was undergoing surgery in the CV operating room with Dr. McGiffin and my coworkers to receive a port for my chemotherapy infusions. I have assisted for many of these procedures, but it takes on a whole new meaning when YOU are the patient. I have been very fortunate to be quite healthy all my life; I was 48 years old when I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma and until that point had never even had an IV before. That was soon to change.

My course of treatment was six months of chemotherapy infusions every other week with radiation treatment if necessary. I was overwhelmed. Even being a medical professional, knowing much of the lingo and being treated "at home" in familiar surroundings at UAB and The Kirklin Clinic®, I have never felt so alone. How was I ever going to get through this life-changing ordeal by myself? My family lives close by in Jasper, Alabama, but I had no immediate family that could be with me on a day-to-day basis.

That is where my story takes on a wholly different perspective. Being a Christian, I immediately turned to the Lord to employ His help as this journey began. I confessed my fear of being alone and also the fear of the unknown outcome of my treatment. Would my body react favorably to the prescribed methods and modalities of treatment? I began journaling each day and sending a weekly update to my family and friends asking them for prayer, telling them of my days in detail and sharing the scriptures that I was reading each week as I went through my treatment. The outpouring of support was overwhelming. Besides my two close friends in Birmingham, who accompanied me every step of the way, the support from my family and friends, both locally and far away, was immense.

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Answers to a Prayer continued.

The support of my UAB family of coworkers in the CV operating room was immeasurable. One nurse who had been through the havoc of chemotherapy and radiation therapy was an enormous help to me emotionally, helping me know what to expect and always listening when I had so many questions. A funny thing about chemotherapy is that you really cannot relate it to people adequately unless they have been through it. It is like you are in a club once you have gone through it—not that you applied for and wanted a membership, but once you have undergone treatment, you

have an instant affinity and understanding of other patients who have been where you have been.

The staff at the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center is amazing. In all disciplines, there was a unified effort to provide excellent care. From the doctors and nurses examining me to the chemotherapy infusion nurses, radiology technicians, diagnostic testing in The Kirklin Clinic® and the support staff in each area, I was met with professionalism and compassion. I felt that these many individuals aided me with their desire to help one in need at a vulnerable time. My desire through this experience is to help others. Just as I have offered to help others through the Cancer Center, I have been treated so kindly [in my own care]. [The staff] always asks about me first and how I am doing with respect for me as an individual. I am so proud to be a part of the UAB system. I experienced the staff in so many different areas willing to reach out in so many tangible ways to one patient. I know at UAB we provide excellent care to so many individuals each day. I would recommend our medical-care facility and services to anyone based on the excellent care I am receiving, even if I wasn't a staff member.

[I must] share just how much my own nursing unit, the CV operating room, supported me throughout my ordeal. One week in September I received a red wristband similar to the yellow "Live Strong" bracelets popularized by Lance Armstrong. However, my wristbands are bright red and say, "Be Not Afraid." Many of the staff ordered these and wore them on my behalf every day. It was such a strong symbol of their support. They were not only supporting me inwardly, in their hearts, but outwardly and visibly by wearing the wristbands. How encouraged I was walking down the hall in the CV operating room seeing those bands on the wrists of my coworkers!

In November, my coworkers presented me with a quilt. They secretly had written notes of encouragement, scripture verses, and get-well wishes on white square blocks of material. Two of the nurses, longtime friends of mine, then pieced them into a beautiful quilted treasure for me to use during my chemotherapy. I was speechless, and the tears began flowing so much that I could not even read the sentiments expressed to me on the quilt.

The list goes on and on. A day did not go by that someone didn't ask me how I was doing or offer to help me in some small way. Coworkers and friends sent cards, meals and gifts, and offered prayers, provided rides to chemotherapy treatments and covered cases when I was unable to assist at the operating table. When I started losing my hair, two male coworkers also shaved their heads, and another staff member made me a wig.

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Answers to a Prayer continued.

The doctors allowed me to use their office near the operating room to eat my meals and as a place to work and rest. My head nurse provided me with projects I was able to do so that I remained productive at work. Every December, Dr. McGiffin has a holiday luncheon for his staff. Several years ago, in lieu of exchanging gifts, we decided to give money to a worthy charity. I was touched when the charities they chose to support in 2006 were the Cancer Center and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society as a result of my diagnosis. These kindnesses played a

huge role in keeping my spirits high while I went through an arduous chemotherapy regimen.

My chemotherapy ended in January 2007, and my repeat scans and tests were completed that same month. I was in remission! Although my tests were clear, several of the lesions had not decreased in size, and [my doctors] determined that I should undergo radiation treatment. My radiation oncologist, Ruby Meredith, M.D., Ph.D., explained everything very clearly to me, and I began treatment in February, continuing into March 2007. Again, my faithful support team never faltered in encouraging me.

It was now May 14, 2007, and time for all the repeat testing to resume. It also was a special day because that is my birthday. Dr. Forero walked in the examination room and gave me the best present ever: He told me I was still in remission and no further treatment was necessary. What a glorious day! I had my port removed and am getting stronger every day. I am walking or riding my bike several days a week to regain my strength and stamina. My hair and appetite are returning, and I am again able to assist with cases in the CV operating room.

I am truly thankful that the Lord has seen me through this journey. Though I initially feared I would walk this difficult path alone, He heard my prayers and sent many others to walk alongside me. I would never wish the experience of cancer, its difficult treatment regimens and effects upon anyone. At the same time, I am grateful to have had this experience for myself. I am a much stronger and better person for having gone through it.

We tend to think that our mortality is in the far future. I feel as if I have had a taste of mortality in my midlife. My perspective on many things has changed. I felt I was already a grateful person by nature, but now I am grateful for each day, for each breath that the Lord allows me. I am more patient knowing that things take time to occur. As I write this, it has been 11 months since I discovered the lump in my neck. It will be several more months before I feel like my old self again, but I am well on my way. My hope is that in the future I will be able to help someone who is struggling with their cancer diagnosis and help them to know they are not alone. I surely was proven wrong when I thought it was a path I would walk alone. I will never see a person with thinning hair, a bald head or a cap due to chemotherapy treatments and not stop to offer a silent prayer on their behalf and an audible word of encouragement to them personally. My advice is to not be afraid to reach out to others who are going through a difficult time. You might just be the answer to their prayers.