

HEALTH REPORT



Sentara's Innovative Cancer Treatment Saves Weeks of Treatment Time

In June of 2013, Linda was certain something was wrong. A passionate elementary school principal, she felt a drop in her typically high energy level. For quite a while, she and her doctor had been monitoring a lump in one of her breasts. They had determined that it wasn't anything to worry about, but Linda felt her body was sending her a message that she needed to understand. At age 56, she made the decision to retire at a much younger age than she had originally planned.

The diagnosis

After one relaxing vacation in the summer of 2013, Linda's

primary care physician (PCP) recommended that she see a women's imaging specialist at the Sentara Lorton Station Women's Imaging Center in Lorton, Virginia. Because Linda has dense breast tissue, the ultrasound tech performed an ultrasound on both breasts and recommended a biopsy of a 2.2-centimeter lump in one of her breasts. Ironically, it was not the breast that Linda and her PCP had been monitoring. The clinical team also performed a DNA swab. If the biopsy came back positive, then the test could be matched to her DNA. This additional safety measure would ensure that Linda's results were shared with her, and not another patient's results.

On September 30, 2013, Linda received news that didn't surprise her. The biopsy showed that she had invasive ductile carcinoma. Linda's cancer was diagnosed Stage 2, an intermediate risk category. She now had to investigate her surgical and treatment options, and ready herself to fight.

"I decided that if I was going to fight, I was going to fight all the way," she said.

The treatment options

With her doctor and family by her side, Linda weighed the treatment options. Dr. Negar Golesorkhi, a fellowship-trained breast surgeon with the Sentara Northern Virginia Comprehensive Breast Center outlined the clinical options.

"I spend an hour, sometimes more, educating and counseling my patients and family with a new diagnosis of breast cancer," said Dr. Golesorkhi. "Engaging the patient and the family early on with decision-making is key. Answering their questions and concerns to the best of my ability is my goal. I always tell my patients they are much bigger than this disease, and together we will beat it."

In addition to information from Dr. Golesorkhi, Linda also met with Julie Pierce, a Sentara Patient Navigator. As an oncology certified nurse, Julie's role is to provide further information and support to cancer patients and their loved ones.

"I met with Linda and her husband on the day of surgery and throughout her treatment," said Julie. "I always make myself available to answer questions about patients' specific diseases, treatments, and resources here in the community. In addition, I have breast cancer specific resources that help the patient and family through the journey."

After learning that the mortality rates for lumpectomy and mastectomy were almost identical, Linda decided to go with a lumpectomy and chemotherapy.

During this decision process, she also learned about a new clinical trial called Intraoperative Radiation Therapy (IORT). IORT is a 10-minute radiation treatment that is performed at the time of surgery for candidates who meet strict clinical criteria that are evaluated prior to surgery. If Linda qualified, she would be able to avoid the need for any additional radiation therapy. The typical course for external beam radiation therapy for breast cancer patients runs six to seven weeks. While Linda was hopeful about the possibilities of IORT, she wouldn't know if it could be administered until after she was out of surgery.

Just over a month after her cancer diagnosis, Linda went in for surgery at Sentara Northern Virginia Medical Center. When Linda woke up, she learned that she was a perfect candidate for IORT, and the therapy had been administered. She was on her way to recovery.

"I felt so blessed that I received this treatment," she said. "I was the 21st person in the state of Virginia to receive this treatment. Sentara Northern Virginia Medical Center is one of the few places to offer this treatment, and I was completely impressed with their level of care from beginning to end. They know me and treat me as a person, not just a patient."

Post-surgery

Linda experienced many of the classic side effects of chemotherapy. Because she had chosen to do a lumpectomy, her dose of chemotherapy was more aggressive than it would have been had she elected to have a mastectomy. Every two weeks from January through mid-April, Linda went in for her chemotherapy treatments and a course of steroids. Chemotherapy caused a lot of dryness in her digestive system, some of it so severe that she often had difficulty eating. The chemotherapy depleted her energy and also made it hard to sleep. She learned after the second treatment, she would lose her hair. Rather than let that happen, she shaved her head immediately after her first treatment.

"Shaving my head on my terms helped me to feel more in control of my future," she said. "I called my shaved head my 'warrior look'. I wanted to deal with this challenge head-on."

Coping with chemotherapy

When Linda recounts the long months of the winter of 2014, she points to several important factors that contributed to her inner strength and resolve to fight.

"The nurses at the infusion center were marvelous. So supportive. So compassionate. Their care was critical to my successful treatment."

Linda also had a tremendous support network that included family, friends, and faith.

"Walking from the couch to the kitchen took a lot of effort, but I made myself do it. Every day, I did some kind of exercise. I used my treadmill and did laps around the house while I was on the phone. Friends, especially the teachers and staff from my school, brought meals for me and my family. My husband was so patient and supportive."

This kind of external support helped Linda to strengthen her own personal resolve to keep fighting.

"I let my faith become stronger than my fear. Cancer may have gotten me down, but I wasn't going to let it take me out."

Life after cancer

Now two years after her diagnosis and a year and a half after the end of chemotherapy, Linda feels incredible. Her fatigue has subsided and her energy is back. She's actively working on taking off the weight that she gained because of the chemotherapy. Her hair has grown back even thicker and curlier than before.

"I'm sharing my story to give other people hope. Listen to your body. It knows when something is wrong. This journey is hard, but it's not impossible."

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Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, October 2014, six months after finishing my chemo. I made it to the finish line...one of the last ones, but I finished!

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