

An old adage says that love often comes along when we least expect it. For Alice Chenoweth and James Collins it came along when and where they least expected it.

This past March, both Alice and James were undergoing radiation therapy – she for breast cancer, he for prostate cancer. Both courses of treatment required daily visits to the Center for Cancer Care at Valdese Hospital for a period of about eight weeks.

Day after day the two recently-widowed seniors got to know each other in waiting rooms and pre-treatment areas. Soon, hospital staff couldn't help but notice that an affectionate bond seemed to be forming between them.

"At first James was very depressed and down," said Unit Secretary Gail Lowman. "He would tell us stories about his wife, and about how sad his life was now without her. But eventually he seemed to hit it off with Alice. He was so excited to have met somebody. It made all the staff happy to see them getting along so well."

Alice, a retired nursing manager from Caldwell Memorial Hospital, said she and several other patients noticed James' initial gloomy state. "When I first met James he was very sad," said Alice. "There were a couple of ladies in the waiting room before I came out. They had noticed how depressed he was. The next day they said to me – 'We have got to get him out of that depression.'" With a chuckle Alice added, "I said OK, exactly what are we going to do?"

For the next several days Alice and her friends set out to cheer James up. "We tried to tell him that his frame of mind just wasn't good for him," she explained. "Eventually I invited him to go and have coffee, but," she adds quickly with another chuckle, "I didn't offer anything except coffee!"

James, a funeral home employee and World War II veteran, was quick to take interest in Alice.

"When I first saw that beautiful little lady step out of the dressing room into the lobby, I nodded at her and she nodded at me," said James. "Normally I'd have dropped it at



Alice Chenoweth and James Collins last October after their engagement

that, but I didn't. Something inside me just said – there's the lady you've been looking for—so I went over and introduced myself."

In later conversations James learned that Alice had lost her husband 24 days after his wife had died. "We had some things in common," he said, "and I wanted to get to know her better."

Radiation Oncologist Greg Jones, MD smiles broadly as he talks about the history of the Chenoweth-Collins relationship. "They were both under treatment for problems that were curable," said Jones. "Still, when a person finds out they have a malignancy the immediate response is that you see your life flash before your eyes. You think 'this could be it.' Jim was going through that sort of feeling—and he was grieving the loss of his wife."

Jones continued, "It was clear to us early on that Jim had an interest in Alice. He began to ask our staff some questions about her, but for patient confidentiality reasons they couldn't tell him anything except that it was alright to talk with her if she didn't mind."

"I wouldn't say that a radiation treatment center is an environment that's particularly conducive to romance, but it's certainly a reasonable environment for people to get to know one another," Jones said. "Curative treatments tend to take weeks and weeks of therapy, so the people who are having treatments have time to get acquainted and form friendships. But before long it became clear that James and Alice were becoming quite close – more than just friends."

Before progressing much further with this story, it should be said that on December 21, 2003, Alice and James were married at Bethany Baptist Church in James' hometown of Forest City, NC. The friendship that began earlier in the year had progressed quickly to mutual feelings of love.

James proudly recounted the course of their courtship. "We had grown to know each other pretty well and we were getting along great," he said. "That's when Alice started traveling around the country a bit. She went to California to visit some relatives, but I still pursued her by cell phone, and finally she agreed to let me have a date. So on May 28th we had our first date. I soon fell in love with her, and along



Radiation Oncologist Greg Jones, MD (far right) with the Collins at their wedding



He boxed up a large section of the cake and sent it to his friends and extended family at Valdese Hospital.

Gail Lowman said the cake was wonderful, but that it was even better to see two nice people find love at what could have been the lowest points in their lives.

"I heard Mr. Collins say one time that it was just meant to be for him to have cancer, so he could meet Alice," said Lowman. "You really don't know when you'll find light at the end of a tunnel."

Dr. Jones added that the future looks very bright for the Collins. Both have been given a clean bill of health and are currently cancer-free.

Alice is a prolific traveler, and she and James plan to spend many happy years seeing the world together.

With a spark of mischief in his eye James said, "I told Alice that I had not been a man to travel, but if she had the money I had the time – and thank God she has the money!"

Laughing, Alice added, "He has a great sense of humor, but I have to put up with it all the time."

The Collins' have found happiness and love, as well as close friends they'll never forget at Valdese Hospital. With all the authority of a former nurse manager Alice said, "They are wonderful people, and they give excellent care!"

Dr. Jones and his staff are happy to have had the opportunity to share in the Collins' joy. "They both could have gone to other hospitals for their treatment," he said. "But we have the best and friendliest staff assembled that I've ever worked with. Usually people who finish their treatment here feel like they have a new set of friends and family. I'm glad we had a small part in bringing them together."

about mid-August or September she had decided she had the same feelings toward me."

The two decided to marry, and the entire staff of the Valdese Hospital Radiation Therapy Department was invited.

Dr. Jones made it a point to attend the wedding, and said it was a sweet and special event. "James invited all the staff, and I marked my calendar right away, because I knew I didn't want to miss it," said Jones. The wedding was right after the church's Christmas cantata. The auditorium was pretty with the Christmas decorations along with the additional candles for the wedding."

After a reception that featured an impressive spread of food, Jones said that James and Alice cut a huge multi-tiered wedding cake. "There was a lot of cake left after the reception, and Jim looked at me and said, 'I know what we'll do with this cake!'"



Dr. Jones "takes the cake" from a happy James Collins after the wedding.

Scroll down to the next page to read more of our interview with Alice and James, and hear audio of our interview with Dr. Greg Jones



James with granddaughter, Kelly Collins Wortman, great-grandson William James Wortman and son, long-time Grace Hospital employee Robbie Collins.

Collins – Chenoweth Interview Excerpts

BRHC - Alice, where are you originally from?

Alice - Originally from Clarksburg, WV. I graduated from the nursing program in West Virginia. Then my late husband and I lived in Washington, DC, then Pennsylvania – to WV – back to Pennsylvania. I lived in the Pittsburgh area, then the Harrisburg area. Later we lived in Orlando, Florida. At one point my husband was disabled. I applied with a company in Alaska and we moved up there for three years then came to Miami. One day my husband came home and said we are moving from here. He pulled out a map and tried to find a place that was like West Virginia, but wasn't as cold. That's how we ended up in this area.

BRHC - And what did you do for a living when you came to North Carolina?

Alice - I was first hired by Frye Hospital in Hickory. About a year later I was recruited by Caldwell Memorial Hospital. The Director of Nursing made me a good offer and I took a nursing supervisor job and worked there for almost 17 years.

BRHC - James, please tell us how you and Alice first met. We met at Valdese Hospital – both for the same purpose we both had cancer.

James - I was in a low state with prostate cancer. I had lost my late wife some 12 or 13 months earlier. I chose to go to Valdese Hospital. It was fate – I was actually going to go to Grace. But when I got to Grace Dr. Gregory Jones directed me on to Valdese General. That was my first treatment with radiation – I had to have 41 treatments.

That morning a very beautiful little lady stepped out of the dressing room into the lobby where I was waiting to take my treatments. Normally in speaking to a lady (she nodded at me) and I did her, I'd have dropped it at that,

but I didn't. Something said – there's the lady you've been looking for. So I went over and introduced myself to her.

In the conversation I found that she had lost her husband 24 days after I had lost my wife – she lived in Granite Falls. In the days that followed she invited me for coffee. I was so glad.

BRHC - So when did you think the relationship would be more than a friendship?

James - It didn't take me long to fall in love with Alice Chenoweth. She is a registered nurse with a masters degree in nursing. She is retired. She worked in Caldwell County – that was where she worked for the last 15 years. She had invited me to coffee and I went. From there on this developed. Alice was running around the country some. She went to California, but I still pursued by cell phone, and finally she agreed to let me have a date. So on May 28th I went for my first date. Along about mid-August or September she had decided that she had the same feelings toward me. As time progressed our love grew. December 21st will be our marriage date. I'm so proud.

BRHC - Are you both in good health these days?

James - We both today show no sign of Cancer. Dr. John Speagle is my urologist and Dr. Gregory Jones is my Oncologist. Those two men did a wonderful job. Dr. Jones is a fine person – I give him a lot of credit for my recovery. Dr. Speagle kept constant watch for five years on my PSA – when it shot up, he said "it's time to do something else," and he recommended me to Dr. Jones.

BRHC - James, are you retired now?

James - I have worked for the same company, Padgett and King Mortuary in Forest City, for 45 years. I plan to retire on March 30th 2004. They're fine people to work for.

BRHC - I understand you are a veteran - from which war or conflict?

James - I was in WWII. I was in Europe for 26 months in a medical division, and I was in five campaigns starting with Normandy Beach Head. I was a first sergeant in a dispensary with the First Army.

BRHC - Alice - How did you feel when you first learned you had breast cancer?

Alice - I went for a routine mammogram. I always go for routine mammograms because I'm a nurse and I teach that people should be proactive in doing those kind of things. I was leaving to see my grandchildren for Christmas. I left my cell number with the people who did my mammogram so they could reach me with the results. I didn't think that I'd hear anything from them, but low and behold, I got a call from my doctor's office and he said that I should come in for some follow-up. I came back three days early and he did a breast biopsy. I had already paid for a trip to Thailand, so I went ahead. The doctor said "Well it (the lump) looks very little," so I went ahead on the three-week trip and when I came back I had my lumpectomy. I was in the hospital overnight at Caldwell Hospital. My surgeon there was Dr. Shull. Soon after my surgery he referred me for radiation therapy and I went to Valdese Hospital.

BRHC - I'm curious - why Valdese Hospital?

Alice - He said that I could choose between going to Hickory or Valdese. I lived in Granite Falls, and I figured I could get to Hickory pretty quickly, but it's less traffic and I like small hospitals – that's why I chose Valdese. And I came to find out that they give excellent care.

BRHC - Tell us about the first time you met James. What was your impression of him?

Alice - When I first met James he was very sad. There were a couple of ladies in the waiting room before I came out. The second day, when we saw each other they said to me – “We have got to get him out of that depression.” And I said (laughing) Ok what are we going to do. We ended up cheering him up I think. We tried to tell him that his frame of mind just wasn't good for him. Eventually I did invite him to go and have coffee – I didn't offer anything except coffee. (laughs) He came over and we enjoyed each other's company.

BRHC - When did you think you might like him more than as a friend?

Alice - When I went on my little journeys over the summer I started missing him. I was in the New England states for over a week and in WV for a funeral, then I went to my son's house in Nevada, then I went on to California. But James kept calling me and calling me and catching me everywhere. I said to myself “This one really has a purpose.” When I came back he came up to meet one of my cousins and that's when we really started talking kind of serious.

BRHC - James - when did you propose?

James - I proposed in September. I never went to see her without taking her fresh roses out of my garden.

Alice - Until about the last couple of weeks I have had fresh roses every time he came to see me.

BRHC - Where are you going on your honeymoon?

Alice - We've planned to go to Florida to see my grandkids. (she laughs) How many people go to see their grandkids on their honeymoon?

BRHC - How many kids and grandkids do you have?

Alice - Three boys that are in their forties and two grandkids – one's three and a half and one's five.

BRHC - James - same question.

James - I have two sons and seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Alice and I between us have 105 years of marriage but our pastor still wanted to counsel us. (laughing heartily)

BRHC - Oh really, well what did he tell you?

James - He said with the years of experience you have I'm going to recommend a book to read so he just gave us a book. Well we read in it some (he laughs).

BRHC - James and Alice - Anything else you'd like to see in print about yourselves?

James - I think I could have searched the world over and I could not have found anyone that would even come close to comparing with Alice Chenowith. I told her that I had not been a man to travel, but if she had the money I had the time and thank God she has the money!

Alice (laughing) He has a great sense of humor, but I have to put up with it all the time.

James - If you would, mention that my son Robbie Collins works at Grace Hospital and has for thirty-three years. His friends might find it interesting to know that the story is about his dad.

[Click here to download an mp3 interview with Radiation Oncologist Greg Jones, MD, about James and Alice](#)

