

# Press Release

## Surviving Cancer Faith and Friends Fuel Cancer Survivor's Fight



Last Sunday, over 500 people gathered at Dana Corporation's park to celebrate National Cancer Survivors' Day, but one of Burke County's longest surviving cancer patients couldn't attend. A cancer survivor since 1967, Margaret Benfield was at Grace Hospital—but this time she was not the patient. She sat with her two sons at her husband Noah's side—himself a cancer survivor after a six-year bout with multiple myeloma.

The cheerful and loving Benfield family reminisced about their own ups and downs dealing with one of America's most indiscriminant killers.

"Many years ago it was Dr. J.B. Helms who diagnosed my cancer," said Margaret. "I had a little lump about the size of a marble, and when I went to see him he said 'Oh Lord, you've got cancer and you've got to have surgery.' It was near Christmas and my daughter-in-law was in the hospital at that time. I decided to wait until January to have the surgery, though they wanted to do it right away."

Her physicians, the late Dr. Helms and Dr. Hairfield didn't fully understand the severity of Margaret's cancer until she was on the operating table.

Her older son, J.C. explained, "Her last words when she went into surgery were 'Don't let them take my breast off.' Later the doctor came in and said they would have to do a mastectomy. I had to sign for Mother's breast to be removed. It was the hardest thing I've ever done."



Margaret Benfield and her husband Noah enjoy the air and flowers on the porch of their Oak Hill Community Home.

After the surgery, Margaret was devastated. But the fear and uncertainty she was experiencing continued to mount. Her doctors wanted to remove her ovaries to lessen the chances of the cancer spreading. The next week she was on the operating table again.

Modern advances in cancer therapy offer options to traditional surgery for many patients. "Today, hormone therapy would have accomplished the same thing for Margaret that her surgery did at the time," said Dr. Carolyn Mook, Director of Medical Oncology for Blue Ridge HealthCare.

A native of the Oak Hill Community, Margaret learned to cope with the changes brought about by her mastectomy. She was fitted for prosthetics, and went about her normal life. A devout Christian and Sunday School teacher, she exhibited faith and determination that would prove inspirational to generations of women and men facing life with cancer.

"The Man upstairs has taken care of me," said Margaret. "Dr. Helms had me go out and talk to people about my faith and experiences. I've counseled with many people."

And what does Margaret Benfield say to women today who are diagnosed with breast cancer?

"I say fight it, for one thing," she exclaims with defiance. "And I say to all women that they should watch for lumps. I had no idea my lump could be cancer. It was just like a marble. I had it for a year before I went to the doctor. I just didn't think. Dr. Helms said 'You've got cancer - why did you keep it from me?'"

Dr. Greg Jones, a radiation oncologist and President of the Medical Staff at Valdese Hospital agrees that early detection is key in the fight against cancer.



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## Surviving Cancer - Continued

“The most important factor in combating breast cancer has been advances in early diagnosis,” Dr. Jones said. “Because of improvements in mammograms and the way we read them, as well as better biopsy techniques, we are catching lesions earlier and treating them before they become significant.”

According to the American Cancer Society, the 5-year relative survival rate for localized breast cancer has increased from 72% in the 1940s to 97% today. However, if not caught early and the cancer is given a chance to spread, the 5-year survival rate drops to 78%.

Dr. Jones pointed out that today, early detection is augmented by innovative treatment options like the linear accelerator and computerized three-dimensional treatment planning. This highly precise technology is far superior to the old cobalt treatments, and has significantly improved quality of life for women with breast cancer.

“Combined with the widespread use of chemotherapy and medication following surgery, survival rates are on the rise,” Dr. Mook said. “I believe this is one of modern medicine’s greatest victories in the fight against a major disease.”

Perhaps the best news for cancer patients in Burke County is that they can feel confident about treatment options in their own community.

According to Blue Ridge HealthCare’s Oncology Services Director Debbie Dale, the future of cancer care in Burke County is bright.

“We already have a great team of doctors and support personnel who are providing some of the best cancer care in the southeast,” said Dale. “But we are continuing to build and improve our services. The planned Hallmark Services’ Cancer

Care facilities at Grace and Valdese Hospitals will strengthen our programs and our delivery of services.

Dr. Jones echoes Dale’s sentiment. “We have a major commitment from the Blue Ridge HealthCare Board and the administration to continue to upgrade our facilities, and we’re going to stay on the cutting edge of technology as best we can. The standards of care that we have here are the same as patients would find at any other cancer facility in the United States. There’s really no reason to think that with common malignancies there’s any need to go elsewhere for treatment.”

Margaret Benfield recalled her first Burke County National Cancer Survivor’s day celebration three years ago. “WBTV’s Bob Knowles was the speaker that day,” she remembered.

Although Knowles’ struggle with cancer recently ended sadly (he passed away in May after a valiant fight) Margaret and her family continue to spread the word that cancer can be defeated. As her husband continues the battle, Margaret keeps the faith and lends her comfort as she has with many other cancer patients.

“She’s been a big inspiration to a lot of people who’ve had cancer. Her story of survival has given many folks encouragement to carry on and fight it, and live a normal life,” J.C. said proudly.

The Benfield family thanks God, oncologist Dr. Carolyn Mook and the Blue Ridge HealthCare Oncology Staff, as well as all nurses, staff and physicians at Grace Hospital. “Faith and prayer is all that’s kept us here,” said Margaret’s husband, Noah. “That and excellent care we’ve gotten over the years.”