



# Thriving Against the Odds

When Martha Atwood went to her primary care doctor complaining of headaches, fatigue, and night sweats, she had no way of knowing what lay ahead. Her bloodwork came back with unusually high white blood cell counts and her daughter Luci, who had driven her to the appointment, was instructed to bring her mother straight to the local Emergency Department where she was told that she had leukemia. Martha was admitted to the hospital and due to COVID restrictions, Luci was not able to see her mother in person again for several weeks.

After several days, upon recommendation from family member Dr. Daniel Hicks, a therapeutic radiologist at Yale, Martha was transferred to Smilow Cancer Hospital on a snowy day in February, 2021. On her first day at Smilow, she met with the Hematology team and further testing was scheduled. The testing revealed that in fact Martha did not have leukemia, but rather a rare blood cancer known as Burkitt lymphoma, a type of non-Hodgkin B-cell lymphoma. She would later learn that this is a highly aggressive, fast-moving disease, which she and her family had witnessed firsthand; she was celebrating Christmas in December, and by the end of January she could not get out of bed. Her family learned all of this over the phone since COVID restrictions prevented visitors, and suddenly Martha found herself facing a rare cancer diagnosis during an unusual time to be a patient, healthcare worker, or caregiver. Luckily her care team was in place and a treatment plan was quickly developed.

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we are all thankful for the time the doctors gave us to answer questions. We were all able to stay in touch over our cell phones through this unknown time and the fabulous nurses kept me alive with their smiles, care, and happy souls,” said Martha. “They anticipated my needs physically and emotionally and went above and beyond when I could not be with my family. My family was shocked, concerned, and scared for me and not being able to be there to hold my hand through it was hard on everyone. We relied so much on that connection provided via technology that they gave us.”

Scott Huntington, MD, MPH, MSc, Associate Professor of Medicine (Hematology) and Medical Director of the Hematology Outpatient Program, led the charge and started Martha on an intensive combination chemotherapy regimen known as EPOCH. A Hickman port was placed so that blood could easily be drawn, and medication could be administered as needed. At this point, after several weeks in the hospital, Martha moved to The Suites at Yale New Haven to be nearby for her many appointments and was finally able to reunite with her daughter.

Martha completed five weekly hospital stays to receive six rounds of chemotherapy continuously. With breaks to recover between each session, her treatment spanned over seven months. Martha remarked that between the back and forth for all the appointments they covered over 5,000 miles. With the help of her team at Smilow, she was even able to visit her newborn granddaughter in California during her treatments by taking several precautions.

“Burkitt lymphoma is a rare disease, with approximately 1,200 individuals diagnosed in the US each year. This



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aggressive lymphoma typically presents with rapidly progressive symptoms and advanced stage (III/IV). Martha had stage IV disease and there was evidence of cancer cells in her cerebral spinal fluid,” said Dr. Huntington.

As part of the treatment plan, lumbar punctures to Martha’s spine were needed to directly administer chemotherapy into the spinal fluid to eradicate tumor cells. “Physician Assistant Ethan Kohn was amazing and together we set a hospital record for number of lumbar punctures performed with a total of 20,” said Martha. “The procedure took about 20 minutes and Ethan provided comforting bedside care each time. In order to remain still, I would mentally play five holes of golf on my local course. I could not have gotten through this without Ethan’s kind and expert care.”

After six rounds of EPOCH, a PET scan showed that Martha’s cancer was in remission. “These results came as a huge relief to me and my entire family, as there was no plan B at that time. It was all very intense in the moment and I am just now processing all that I went through. This treatment regimen saved my life, but it was by no means easy,” commented Martha. “It is difficult to get back to normal life and my immune system is still recovering. Physically, I am back to doing what I love such as caring for my many acres of wooded property, riding my tractor, golfing, gardening, and managing my gift shop, but mentally I am still dealing with the after-effects. Surviving cancer changes you, and I am still adjusting to that part.”

Martha commented that staying connected with her family was crucial to her recovery, as well as being able to stay connected to her care team while she was not at the hospital. “You don’t feel lost when you leave, they made a point to stay connected with us, which was crucial in our eyes,” said Martha. “I cannot say enough about the care that I received. I was diagnosed with a rare cancer, and they were able to cure me, all while providing compassionate, thoughtful care. The experience was traumatic, but I survived. I am here. I can hug my family now. I thank the team at Smilow Cancer Hospital every bit for that.” ☺