

Survival and Hope *Life After Cancer*



 **ANNA VELA, 78**
DIAGNOSIS: BREAST CANCER

The Basics:

- **RESIDENCE:** Victorville
- **OCCUPATION:** Retired after 21 years working at Baldwin Park Unified School District as a teacher's aide and a secretary in the counseling office of adult education.
- **FAMILY:** Juan Vela, 82, husband; John David Vela, son; Katrina Yvonne Galvan, daughter; six granddaughters, two grandsons; eight grandchildren, four great-grandchildren.
- **HOBBIES:** Going to old movies and casinos, active in the bereavement ministry at Holy Innocents Catholic Church in Victorville.
- **PHILOSOPHY:** Don't let cancer or any illness get you down. Get yourself up and say thank you, I am up this morning, and you go on.

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Anna Vela has a long history with cancer. She was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, and the disease has recurred five times.

"Cancer is a part of me, that's how I feel," Vela said. "I am 78 years old, and I have had it for 36 years. It's a part of my life."

"The second time (I was diagnosed), I was driving on the freeway screaming 'Why me? Why me?'"

"My children were young, my mom and dad were still alive. My youngest daughter was only a teenager.

My children were devastated then. But now they say... 'it's 'OK mom, make sure you do what the doctor says.'

"I have had a stroke, encephalitis – I was in a coma for three days, not expected to live, and cancer after that. My husband tells me I am using up all my cat lives. What keeps me going is family, friends, and faith."



But others in her family have battled cancer, too.

Vela's great-grandson, Isaac Mendiola, was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2015 when he was 17.

"He had just become a senior when he was diagnosed,"

Vela said. "He had it for 9 months. "He graduated in a wheel chair with a nurse helping him. The whole city of Baldwin Park was behind him. He died a month after he graduated."

Vela also lost her daughter Sandra Vela to uterine cancer at age 46.

"My daughter went through so much chemo and radiation therapy, her body shut down," Vela said.

"My great-grandson went through so much. Why did they have to suffer through so much and I didn't? I don't think I could have gone through that."

"I retired 21 years ago and I am still here. I hope my story lifts as least one person and they know that you have to hang in there, you have to have faith and you have to let people help you.

"I tell people you just don't give up. Go on with your life."

Vela credits her longevity to the support of her family, friends and coworkers.

"I had almost given up that first time," she said. "Back in 1982, everybody died of cancer. It was my birthday and I had just gotten home and I was feeling very low and depressed and I heard the doorbell ring.

"I opened the front door and there were the speech therapist and psychologist from (my job) with lunch and balloons.

"We talked and laughed. The support the Special Ed people gave me was great. I said to myself I am going to get up and get well and go back to work. And I did.



"Cancer is a part of me, that's how I feel."

"If you have a group of coworkers like I did, it is the most fantastic thing. At that time, Vela thought, "I wasn't going to see my grandchildren grow up. (Recently) my granddaughter turned 40 and my other granddaughter who is 37 had her baby (last week). Life is great."

Vela said she has "never really been in a support group.

Vela says she has learned to "take one day at a time. Why bother getting angry at little stuff? Life is too short.

"I found out when my daughter died, and my grandson: Love your family and do the best you can. Don't get angry and criticize; love them."

Vela advises fellow cancer patients: "No matter who we are or what kind of cancer we have or what problems we have, we have to take one day at a time.

"A lot of people hear they have cancer and they think that's it, that's the end. No, keep positive. You fight it.

Caregiver Perspective



Juan Vela said when he first heard his wife's cancer diagnosis, "I was really shocked. That's a long time ago.

"I started to panic. We were still young at the time. I started thinking about what's going to happen and what were we going to do.

We are both Catholics, and we did a lot of praying. We still do.

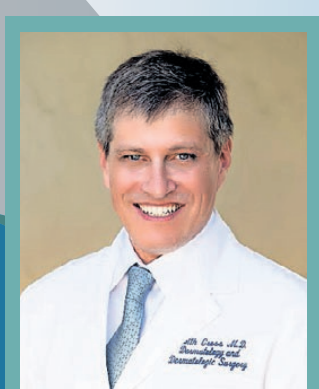
I told her I was going to be there for her all the way through. (The cancer) kept coming up again and again. But we're still here. It's been a long grind.



The American Cancer Society provides a 24 hour service to answer questions about diagnosis, insurance, local support and resources

www.cancer.org or call 800-227-2345

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Q WHAT DOES SKIN CANCER LOOK LIKE ?

A The skin cancer which occurs most commonly is basal cell carcinoma. It may appear as a non-healing sore or bump on the skin. These should be diagnosed and treated early as their continued growth makes treatment more difficult. If you have any questions about a possible skin cancer, be sure to consult a Board Certified Dermatologist.

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