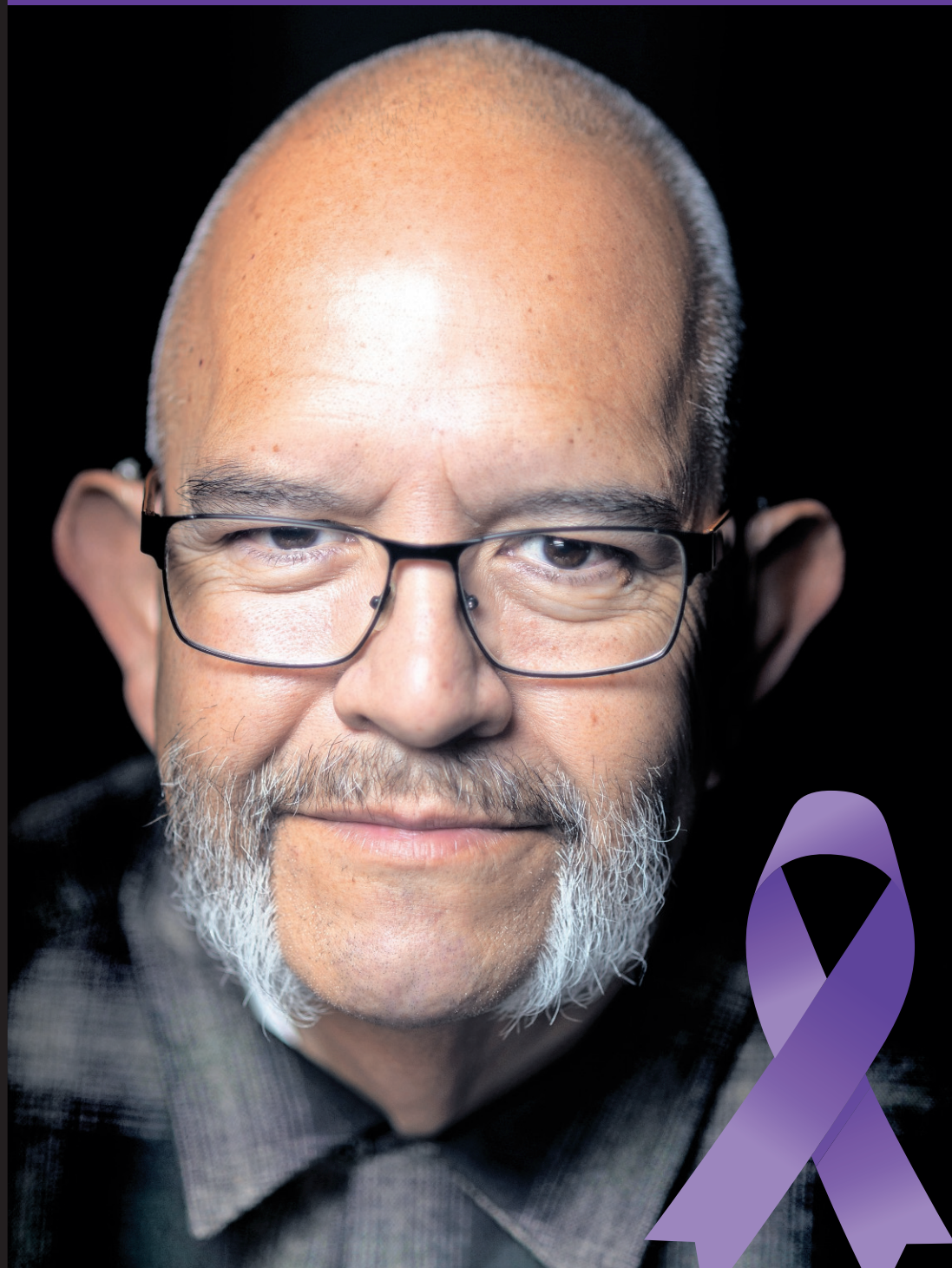


# Survival and Hope Life After Cancer



## About Me:

**RESIDENCE:** Hesperia

**OCCUPATION:** Retired bulk loader at a cement plant

**FAMILY:** Regina Villareal, 58, wife; Michael Villareal, 36, son, and his wife, Roxann; Ernie Villareal, 42, son; six grandchildren

**HOBBIES:** Low-rider cars, building model cars, guitar

**PHILOSOPHY:** Without faith there is no hope

*“I looked at my wife and said, ‘What do I do?’”*



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**

**If you or someone you know would like to be featured in this series, please contact Liz McGiffin at [liz.mcgiffin@cancer.org](mailto:liz.mcgiffin@cancer.org).**

## Ernesto “Ernie” Villareal, 61 Type of Cancer: Liver cancer

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Many people in the High Desert remember Aug. 16, 2016. That was the day the I15 Freeway was closed due to a devastating wildfire and the landmark Summit Inn burned down.

That was also the day Ernesto “Ernie” Villareal and his wife, Regina, learned Ernie had liver cancer.

The Villareals originally went to urgent care in July 2016 because Ernie had abdominal pain.

Blood work revealed his liver count was high and doctors ordered ultrasound and CT scans. There was a lesion on his liver, and a biopsy was done.

“August 16, 2016 we were told it was cancerous,” Regina said. “They also found cirrhosis of the liver secondary to the cancer.

“Doctors said their plan was to get rid of cancer and then put him on a transplant list.

Ernie’s cirrhosis was NASH – nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, most likely due to years of taking prescription medications related to at least 11 prior surgeries.

“When we saw the oncologist, she told us, ‘This cancer is bittersweet,’” Regina said. “This puts you on the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) list.

“Ernie wouldn’t have qualified with regular cirrhosis. Cancer put him up higher.

“He had to get rid of the cancer before they would consider a transplant.

“November was his first treatment. He was placed on the transplant list 22 months later.”

Potential recipients must be ready to arrive at their surgical facility within two hours of being called.

False alarms are frequent, and recipients may be called in many times before their procedure gets a thumbs up.

“The first time we were called in was devastating because the liver was not a match,” Ernie said.

Then at 9 p.m. on June 20, 2018, Ernie was called in again.

“I called the boys and said, ‘OK, we are going to the hospital,’” Regina said.

“The boys asked if they should come, and I said, ‘No, it’s probably no good anyway.’”

Later, when the surgeon said things were “looking good so far,” Regina asked if she should call her sons.

She was told doctors were just waiting for the pathology report.

“Then the nurse came in and said, ‘OK, it’s a match, we are taking you in.’

“I called the boys and said, ‘Come down, because I am going to be here for the next 10 hours,’” Regina said. “That is when it hits you like a ton of bricks.”

All the Villareals know about Ernie’s donor is that she was a middle-aged female.

“We have to wait one year before we write a letter to see if the family wants to meet us,” Regina said. “They also have to wait a year and request to meet Ernie.

“We still have to wait until after June 10.”

Regina says the transplant is “working like a charm.

“Ernie lives on a special diet. All produce must be washed with vinegar and water. He can’t have pork, and meat must be cooked thoroughly.

“We don’t eat out anymore. It is a drastic



change all around. A whole new way of life.

“Of course, he will have to take drugs for the rest of his life.

“He has to go every six months for CT scans just to make sure.

“The doctor said, ‘you can never say that there wasn’t one, tiny cell left behind. We will check you every six months to make sure everything is OK.’”

“Our son Michael went through cancer first. (See Survival and Hope, Life after Cancer, April 18, 2019.)

“When they told us, I was so angry. He was so young.

“Like Michael said, (cancer recurring) is in the back of your head; you will always wonder. If it’s there, it’s there; you just have to go on.

“By the grace of God, I am doing very well, but I wouldn’t have made it without Regina.

“We have been married 42 years. I have been blessed in more ways than one.”

## Last-minute decision:

“Going into transplant surgery, they presented me with a paper that said there was a strong possibility that I might die,” Ernie Villareal said.

“This lady came in and said, ‘They didn’t tell you about this? It says there is a real strong possibility you might die on the table.’

“I looked at my wife and said, ‘What do I do?’

“She said, ‘You need to make that choice by yourself, but whatever choice you make, I will stand by you.’

“During surgery, my heart stopped twice but they were able to bring me back. I feel so strange some days because it just wasn’t my time to go.

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