

Survival and Hope *Life After Cancer*



KATHERINE "KAT" HARRISON, 63

TYPE OF CANCER: STAGE 4 RECTAL CANCER METASTASIZED TO LIVER

The Basics:

- **RESIDENCE:** Oak Hills
- **OCCUPATION:** Logistics administrator
- **FAMILY:** None locally
- **HOBBIES:** Who's got time for that? Before, gardening and animal rescue
- **PHILOSOPHY:** If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. You just do what you have to do.

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Kat Harrison says she comes from stock that believes: "If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger."

She says that toughness will see her through her battle with rectal cancer that has metastasized to her liver.

But she also thinks the insurance and medical industries stymied her efforts to jump on her illness when it

was in early stages.

"About Spring 2017, I knew that something was wrong. I had rectal bleeding, and a colonoscopy was ordered.

But it went from routine to diagnostic as soon as I said, 'I have blood.' And the cost went from free to \$1,400."

Harrison didn't have the money, and the colonoscopy was put on hold.

"All of a sudden you have to become a savvy consumer. You have to know what to say, what not to say.

"I had to wait a year for decent medical insurance." My insurance was effective Aug. 1, 2018. I went to the doctor the next day, had bloodwork on Aug. 3, and on Aug. 4 they called and said go to emergency for a blood transfusion.

"They did a CAT scan and an MRI and saw a mass in my rectal area and spots on my liver."

The ER doctor thought she had diverticulitis and referred her for a colonoscopy. Available appointments were five weeks out.

When the appointment day arrived, "I was backed up and puking," Harrison said. "They couldn't do the colonoscopy and said come back in another five weeks.

"It was December before they did the colonoscopy. Then, they said, 'you have a tumor,' and within a week, I had a colostomy bag.

"The plan was to do some radiation and chemo to shrink the tumor."

But Harrison's rectal tumor had grown substantially and the number of spots on her liver increased from three or four to between 10 and 14.

Her oncologist said they need to reduce her tumor size and the number of lesions to about

five in order to do surgery and have good margins.

"It wasn't until I saw my oncologist that things started happening," she said.

"Now, I have infusion chemo every three weeks and a pill two weeks on, one week off. I have a third infusion to build up my immune system after chemo.

"I am handling chemo – Even when I am hanging onto the walls because I feel like I am going to pass out, I still go to work. I don't get paid if I don't work.

"One of my chemo drugs causes hypersensitivity to cold.

"I have to microwave water to drink it, otherwise, my throat will close up – it feels like it's freezing. I can't open the refrigerator without gloves on.

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"I knew that something was wrong."

"I have to wear long-johns in the middle of summer. My whole body will spasm in reaction to cold.

"I have other side effects from the other chemo I receive. I have a litany of side effects that are just so fun.

Harrison said her diagnosis was a wakeup call to examine her lifestyle.

"Like anything else, you have to be a good consumer," she said. I don't research on WebMD. I go to sites like Sloan-Kettering."

"When I was first diagnosed – first heard the 'C' word – I knew the American Cancer Society has rides to and from," she said.

"I haven't seen what else is available. I have only looked on the American Cancer Society website.

"My best friend has a friend who is going through this, and we kind of compare notes

Harrison said her cancer journey has not changed her outlook on life.

"It's odd," she said. "I think it's because of my strong Christian faith. I don't think it's a death sentence. It is God saying we're going to keep you awhile, but we're going to put you through some tests.

Helping Herself:



Kat Harrison says she "muscles through everything."

But cancer treatment can be exhausting. Now, she hires people when she needs help.

She said sometimes "I can't get out of bed to take care of the critters. I have someone come over and take care of them.

"I have a rescue group helping to place my guinea pigs.

She also hires someone to drive when she needs help.

"I ride the carts at the market," she said. I don't have the energy to push a cart through the market anymore.

"Walking from the office to my car at the end of the day is, 'OK, we're going to go home and go to bed now.'"



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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