

Cancer Awareness

Stories/Photos: Alan Sloan, Tammy Cheek, Brandon Jones, Matt Hollingsworth, Rachel Totten

Everyone has a story

Everyone in some way has been touched by Cancer.

Family, friends, co-workers ... even you may come face-to-face with this disease at some point. This publication focuses attention on the many facets this disease touches.

farragutpress Wednesday, October 9, 2024 • 1C



Kathie Williamson

Fiercely choosing to not live in 'limbo'

On July 31, 2018, while packing for an out-of-town business trip, Kathie Williamson felt an overwhelming sensation to cough. She quickly realized, however, that this was not a typical cough but a frightening indication that something could be terribly wrong.

"I felt something strange in my lungs, and it was just pure blood that was filling my lungs that I was coughing up," Williamson remembered. "I

couldn't even breathe - it felt like I was drowning."

At the hospital, Williamson underwent a series of tests and scans, all the while thinking she was likely experiencing a bleeding ulcer, as cancer doesn't run in her family. But when the doctor finally arrived to discuss the results, her world was turned completely upside down.

"All I heard was the word 'cancer.' I wasn't comprehending anything else

he was saying," she said. "I just knew I wasn't leaving the hospital that night."

Williamson, who was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at the age of 50, ended up staying in the hospital for about a week. Yet, during that first night, all she could think about was how to break the news to her family and friends.

"The first thought I had was that I needed to tell my family and my boss," she explained. "It felt impersonable via

text but I couldn't make those calls at 5 a.m., and I was so worried about them and how they would handle it."

What followed was a whirlwind of doctor visits and various procedures, including 33 radiation treatments right out of the gate.

"Instead of work, I drove to radiation appointments," Williamson said. "It was like my job."

See WILLIAMSON on Page 6C

Victoria's wild marathon ride

The battle with Langerhans cell histiocytosis has never ended

Four-year-old Victoria Rocha and her family have been on a wild ride - a lot of cancer treatment ups and downs for a child not even of kindergarten age - since she was 9 months old.

Or, a "marathon that never ends," according to her mother, Andrea Rocha.

At East Tennessee Children's Hospital, "she was diagnosed with Langerhans cell histiocytosis - or LCH for short - when she was 9 months old, and she underwent pretty much two years of treatment, and then was remissioned one year and then relapsed in the same condition in May," Andrea said.

Her mother recalled when they discovered a bump in the back of Victoria's head on the skull.

"We got a check-up by a pediatrician, and they just said, 'Let's just watch it,'" she said. "Maybe she was at the age where they're learning to sit

up, then maybe she just fell over and we didn't know or it happened and she didn't cry.

"But then a few days later, another bump appeared," Andrea added. "So we waited a couple of weeks and then we went and got an X-ray, and that's when they discovered these lytic lesions, which are consistent with LCH. And from then on, we did the confirmation.

"When we first got the phone call, after the X-ray, saying that we needed to follow up, our pediatrician basically called us and said, 'Hey, we found these spots' (and) ... we were given an appointment with the oncologist down at (ETCH)."

The reaction: "We were really in shock: 'like, what?'" Andrea recalled. "If you hear the word oncology, we were just thinking the absolute worse. At that point, they had told us exactly what we were dealing



Victoria Rocha, 2, surrounded by family members.

See VICTORIA on Page 7C

East Tennessee Children's Hospital in downtown Knoxville:

Hematology/Oncology numbers

Based on Fiscal Year 2024

Kids treated for cancer and other blood disorders

1,267

Total visits to Hem/Onc department

4,329

Chemotherapy treatments administered

2,354

Total patient days

1,607

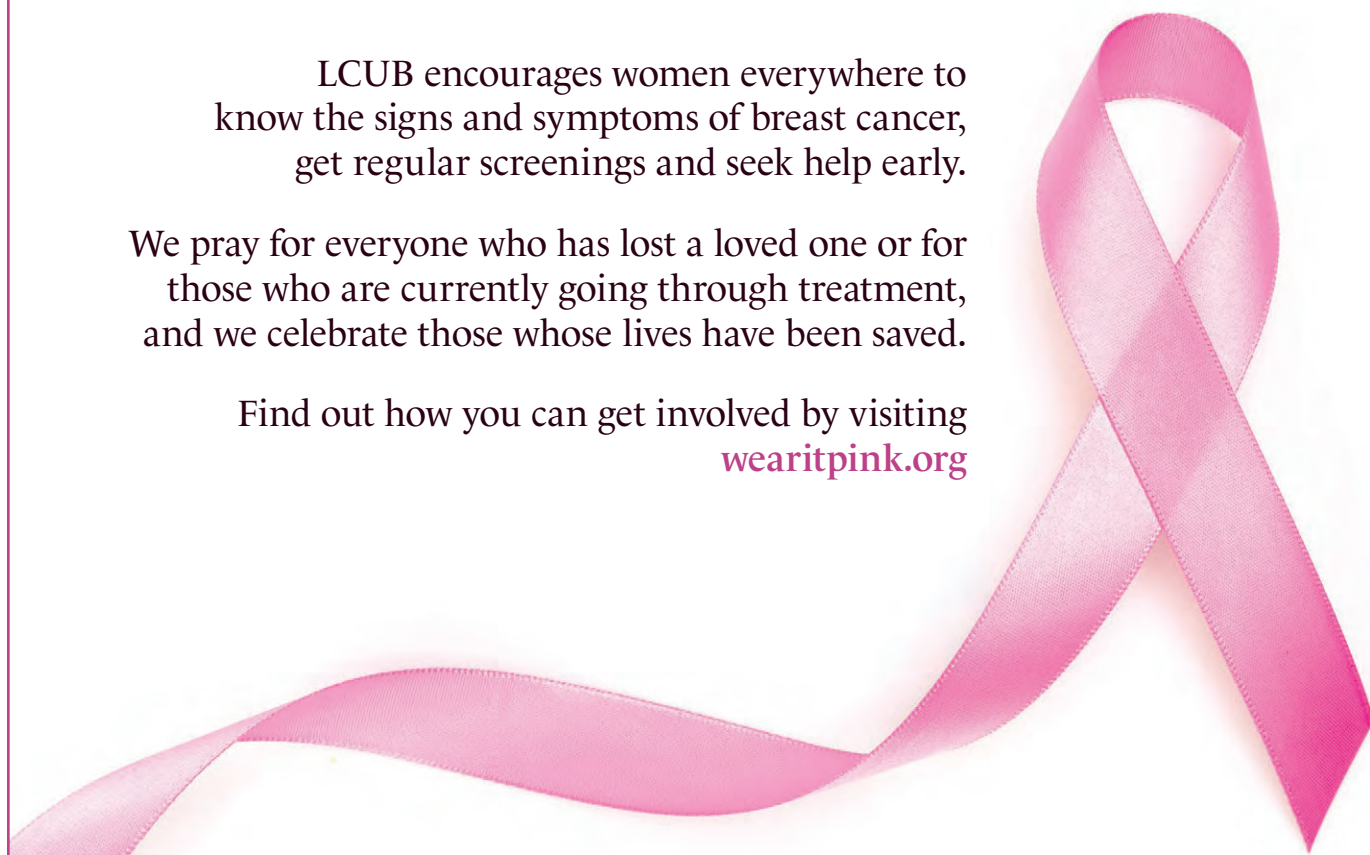
Average length of stay

7.206 Days

LCUB encourages women everywhere to know the signs and symptoms of breast cancer, get regular screenings and seek help early.

We pray for everyone who has lost a loved one or for those who are currently going through treatment, and we celebrate those whose lives have been saved.

Find out how you can get involved by visiting wearitpink.org





Since 1937, East Tennessee Children’s Hospital has been your expert partner in caring for your child. We understand that emotional, social and developmental support are integral components of health care.



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Victoria,
Langerhans Cell Histiocytosis (LCH)
ETCH Patient Ambassador



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In 2024, Real Men Wear Pink of Knoxville Ambassadors

Tens of thousands raised to fight breast cancer

Every year since 2015, Real Men Wear Pink of Knoxville has selected distinguished men throughout Knox County as ambassadors who raise funds for American Cancer Society, according to Stacey Clark-Peck, ACS Associate Development director for state of Tennessee. This year, they have 19 ambassadors who have raised more than \$38,000 toward a goal of \$122,000 by Nov. 4.

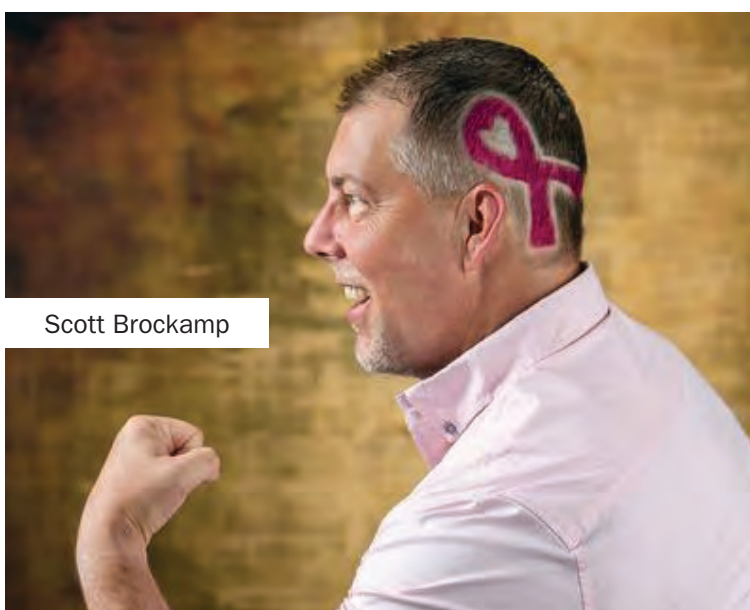
All the money they raise goes to fighting breast cancer, including groundbreaking research, awareness and patient support, such as transportation for patients in rural areas and lodging for people who have to travel for treatment.

According to Clark Peck, ACS has saved more than 2 million lives since 1991.

If you or a loved one is struggling with cancer, you can call American Cancer Society for help.

Ambassadors gathered together for an event at Barley's Taproom and Pizzeria Thursday evening, Sept. 12. And yes, they all wore pink.

As of mid-September the top five ambassadors are Matt Stanley with Powell Clinch Utility District (\$10,384), Girish Desai with El Chico Café (\$7,772), Major Ward with Realty Executives Associates (\$6,203), Terry Adams with Admiral Title Inc (\$4,671) and Gary Watlington with His Se-



Scott Brockamp

curity & Technology (\$2,813).

This is the first year Stanley, with Powell Clinch Utility District, has been an official ambassador.

Though losing his mother to cancer, Stanley is a cancer survivor. He advises newly diagnosed people to "not give up. ... Keep your head up. You can get through this." He has held multiple charity events to raise money. His goal is to reach \$25,000.

Long-time ambassador Desai has returned for his 10th year. He explained his mother passed away from breast cancer in 1985 and his sister currently is fighting ovarian cancer. He's seen first-hand how

devastating cancer can be, but he's also seen how much treatment and technology has improved over the years. That's why he's so passionate about this cause.

El Chico Café is donating the money from every bowl of queso they sell Mondays through Thursdays, along with selling raffle tickets and providing customers a QR code where they can donate.

When asked if he'll return next year, Desai said, "I always say I'm getting out of it, but then I always come back."

In third place is Ward, another first-time ambassador whose family is a long-time supporter of ACS. When he



Gary Watlington

Photos submitted



Deborah Mauldin

was approached this summer to get more directly involved, Ward jumped at the chance to make a big impact.

"It's one of the best causes out there," said Adams, who currently is in fourth place.

"My sister is currently going through her third round of radiation."

He's doing this in support of her, as well as for a friend who

See BREAST CANCER on Page 6C

Wonderful prognosis

God, family, support from her community help Farragut's Burnette become cancer free

The outpouring of love and support to cancer survivor Brooke Burnette of Farragut perhaps was an element in her wonderful prognosis.

Five months after being diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma — breast cancer — Burnette is cancer free.

A double mastectomy proved especially successful.

"The cancer hit her lymph nodes, but they think they caught it before it spread in her body," said her husband, Drew Burnette, a South Ward alderman for the Town of Farragut. "Therefore she got chemo to try and stop the spread."

Brooke received her fourth and final chemotherapy treatment Thursday, Sept. 19.

"I have a couple more surgeries to finish off later this year," she said. "Then, I will start a regimen of drugs for the next five years."

Since April, Brooke has been going through "minor" side effects of chemotherapy and other challenges, but she has not been alone. She has had the

support of her family, church, friends and community.

"Our church community, First Baptist Concord, has been a huge support for us during this time," Brooke said. "They've stepped up in ways we couldn't even imagine."

"Our close friends and family have been supportive of us every step of the way," she added. "Our gym that we go to has helped out tremendously with food, gift cards and support."

At Farragut High School, the "football, soccer and lacrosse families all pitched in and showed us amazing love and support," Brooke said. "The list is honestly incredibly long and it has been overwhelming experiencing all the love and support from this community."

What has especially helped cheer her up and give her strength is her faith. "Living in scripture and prayer," she said. "Trusting in God's plan."

Having cancer "reminds me that my days are numbered and always have been, whether



Above: Drew and Brooke Burnette and two of their children, Brooks Burnette, a 2024 FHS graduate, and Ruth, a sixth-grader at FMS.

Right: Brooke and Drew Burnette, center, alongside friends Dr. Benson Scott, left, and Derek Wright.

Photos submitted

I have cancer or not," Brooke said. "This is still 'the day the Lord has made, and I will still rejoice and be glad in it.'

"It allows me to focus on what's important," she added. "My faith, my family. It has also given me a platform via my Caring Bridge page to share my faith throughout my journey."

Regular prayer and Bible reading "have been an integral part of my management of this disease," Brooke said. "Specifically, when we



found out I was on the divide of whether I needed chemotherapy — and none of my physicians or surgeons could advise me of what they recommended

in my case — it was faith that led me to put it in God's hands and join a clinical trial," she

See PROGNOSIS on Page 5C

UPDATE:

Survivor seeks to Reignite Inspiration

One week. If you were told your 4-year-old wouldn't make it beyond one week, your heart would shatter into an incalculable number of pieces, the shards of which would rain down on your every waking moment for all your time left on earth.

They wouldn't understand the incomprehensible nature of the news at that age. When and if even you told them, they'd likely ask, today, to look at some toys on your phone or ask for a piece of paper on which to draw, oblivious to their plight, planning their presents for an upcoming birthday or Christmas, drawing a picture of something they want you to hang on the refrigerator. You would try through the tears to type the words to find what they want, and every fiber of your being would unravel as they show you their finds or drawings.

Such was the moment, one can imagine, when Joshua Goodling's parents received the news their little boy wouldn't survive beyond much more than the week at hand, when the days of his life were shorter than many of the letters of the days in a week. Such was the moment little Joshua couldn't have understood. Such was the moment the entire world changed for him and his parents. Such was the moment the world would come to change for so many more.

"I remember bits and pieces," Goodling reflected.

The bits and pieces, he'd later learn, were the doctors' news and the family's instructions following the discovery of a malignant tumor in his throat called Rhabdomyosarcoma, which historically, according to his doctors, stamped a single-digit expiration date on many of its recorded victims. His parents were advised to go ahead and plan their little boy's funeral.

This was back in 1970, when radiation and chemotherapy were still in their earlier stages of practice, but it worked.

However, he wasn't out the woods. The radiation did the trick, but his cancer laid in wait like a snake in the grass and later moved to the back of his head, discovered on a family vacation after headache

Prognosis

From page 4C

added. "As far as we knew, the breast cancer was all removed in surgery, but I struggled for a solid week to decide whether to choose chemotherapy or avoid it.

"Ultimately, the Lord revealed to us both (she and Drew) that only He knows whether there are stray cancer cells in my body that need chemotherapy. Upon entering the trial, I randomized to the group that would receive chemotherapy."

There was no second-guessing.

"Only because of faith can we rest in that decision," Brooke said. "If we had not chosen chemotherapy, we would have always wondered if there were stray cancer cells. If we had chosen it, we would have been concerned that we did so unnecessarily."

Along with that, the countless messages, cards, calls and time spent with friends have kept up her spirits.

"Having close friends checking in on me and praying for me has undoubtedly been a huge help and encouragement in dealing with the daily struggles that come with having breast cancer," Brooke said.

While she has not been part of a support group specific to cancer, she said, "Our community, church and friends have provided the support I have needed throughout

complaints one evening.

Chemotherapy sessions ensued. Cancer ultimately was defeated. Happy days.

Farragutpress first reported on Goodling back in October 2020, but a recap and update for readers in this Cancer Awareness special on Goodling's purpose and life since seemed timely.

Goodling, born February 4, 1966, in Elgin, Illinois, still lives in the wake of his past, but he continues to share his story, having cleared every hurdle that's popped up in his life as he continues to find listening ears.

A remarkable story is what streams from his lips to any receptive ear.

He started speaking in fifth grade after asking the pastor of his West Virginia church to use the old building that wasn't in use after an adjacent complex was constructed, knocking on neighborhood doors in search of interest, preaching every Saturday to anybody he could get to come.

"People," he remembered of those who came to hear, "would be, like, 'Wow, this is an amazing story!' So, the impact that I heard I was having on people made me want to do more."

His family, though, moved a lot, mainly depending on how his father felt after one too many bad days at work.

"We moved 32 times," he said. "I've lived in 14 states," making the retention of friends or finding a girlfriend somewhat out of reach. "Things like that," he recalled, "because we moved around so much, I never fit in."

But even with all those moves, Goodling still was willing and able to go find people in all those new cities who wanted, needed, to listen.

Doing what he could through the years, he eventually enrolled in and graduated from Pensacola Christian College. Now an adult and out in the world, though, he had bills to pay. "I finally went to a temporary agency and said, 'I need a job.'" They placed him with a company where he'd enter data.

This was still in the early days of computer technology, as we know it. As strides in software development were

this journey.

"I have met individuals who have either already been through this or are going through it with me who have been invaluable to me in terms of comfort and encouragement," Brooke added.

With that, she said her family has managed "surprisingly well," starting with her husband.

"Drew has been incredibly sensitive to my needs and helpful with tasks around the house, especially after my surgery," Brooke said. "Each of the kids has handled it a little differently based on their personalities, but all of them have been selfless in making sure I have what I need and all of them are helping around the house.

"Once I started losing my hair and it was time to shave it off, all the boys and my husband shaved their heads to show their love and support of me," she added.

What also helped give her strength, she said, was "initially going out for walks as often as possible, especially after I started chemotherapy.

"One of my nurses recommended that hydration is what flushes the dead cancer cells out of your body after chemo, so I decided doing some form of exercise would help sweat them out as well," Brooke added. "Getting back to the gym after my bilateral mastectomy was very important. It helped me mentally, physically



Photos Submitted

Clockwise from top left: Joshua Goodling, a childhood cancer survivor, motivational speaker, author and more, continues more than 50 years after his terminal cancer diagnosis to inspire others with his story. Goodling in the arms of his grandfather, who's looking out the window of his grandson's hospital room between chemotherapy sessions. Now age 58, Joshua Goodling has undergone chemotherapy since the age of 4, battling a seemingly terminal cancer, which has in turn created one inspirational life.

continuing to be made and the Internet was furthering its way, Goodling began to realize he could create a platform for himself.

Right-clicking on websites and toying with coding, a new world started to unfold. In 2000, he moved to Atlanta, landing a job as a web developer for WebMD, where he worked for the next eight years.

During that time, Goodling had an epiphany: "Why don't I build a website to tell my own story?" "I began to get e-mails from people all over the world," he said. "I began to see more and more how my story was affecting people."

One such e-mail came from a girl in Australia. "She said I'm the only reason she's still alive," he recounted.

The girl was having a tough go and was on the verge of suicide. She told him she'd sat down at her computer to write an e-mail to her family and friends, explaining her decision, but couldn't think of a particular word.

One does strive to get their last letter right. She went online to search it out. One of the results that came up led her to Goodling's website, where she read "One week to live. Read

and socially.

"Staying hydrated has been very helpful. I've been focused on getting a lot of vegetables and protein in my diet."

Does Brooke feel she is stronger by her experience? "I don't know about stronger, but it has made me more intentional," she said.

"Having cancer has forced me to slow down," Brooke added. "With five kids, we are busy and we stay busy. It has been nice to slow down and enjoy the little things again."

Brooke's story started last April through a yearly mammogram, so she urges other women to get their yearly mammogram, and "talk to your doctor about anything unusual," she advised.

this." And she did, finding, too, a reason not to end her life after all.

"That's when I started writing different things," Goodling said. "People need encouragement. They need help. They need hope. They need to understand that just because life throws you a curve ball, it doesn't mean you need to swing."

Goodling reflected on 2020, when the world's population was at odds with COVID-19, complaining about all the things we all remember complaining about back then. Instead of contracting COVID-19, he had a stroke, which only stoked the fire in him afterward to continue spreading his story, to remind folks everything can get worse, but that there's always a light at the end.

But that light is always flickering.

His parents had at long last settled in Knoxville in 2016. Goodling was still working in Atlanta. His father died that year, leaving his mother alone.

In 2018, he reconciled he could do what he was doing anywhere and decided to move to Knoxville to help his mother. She remarried in 2021.

His stepfather died last December. And he found his mother, who'd been sick for a while and had gone to lie down, this summer, never to awaken from her August nap.

Yes, the last several years have not been kind to Goodling. But he continues to spread the message of the importance of kindness.

"Just because life becomes hard," he said, "it doesn't mean we have to give up. ... The most important thing is knowing God and having a relationship with him.

"Without God, I know I couldn't make it. He gives me strength and encouragement."

Today, Goodling continues to spread his message and story any chance he gets. Who could calculate how many lives he's saved? Not everybody writes about their darkest moment. Who today could use any speck of inspiration? Who today could use a kind word to help them make it to tomorrow?

On Feb. 11, 2025, Joshua Goodling will be 59 and one week.

For more information about Goodling's story or to contribute to his cause, visit joshuagoodling.com or his GoFundMe page at <https://gofund.me/85ed81d6>.



Brooke Burnette getting support from her daughter, Ruth.

All story photos submitted

"If diagnosed, avoid diving into the abyss of Google," she warned. "Every cancer case is so unique to the individual and

the diagnosis, and you can really get bogged down with running scenarios through your head at all the 'what ifs.'"



We honor those who fought cancer and celebrate the survivors.

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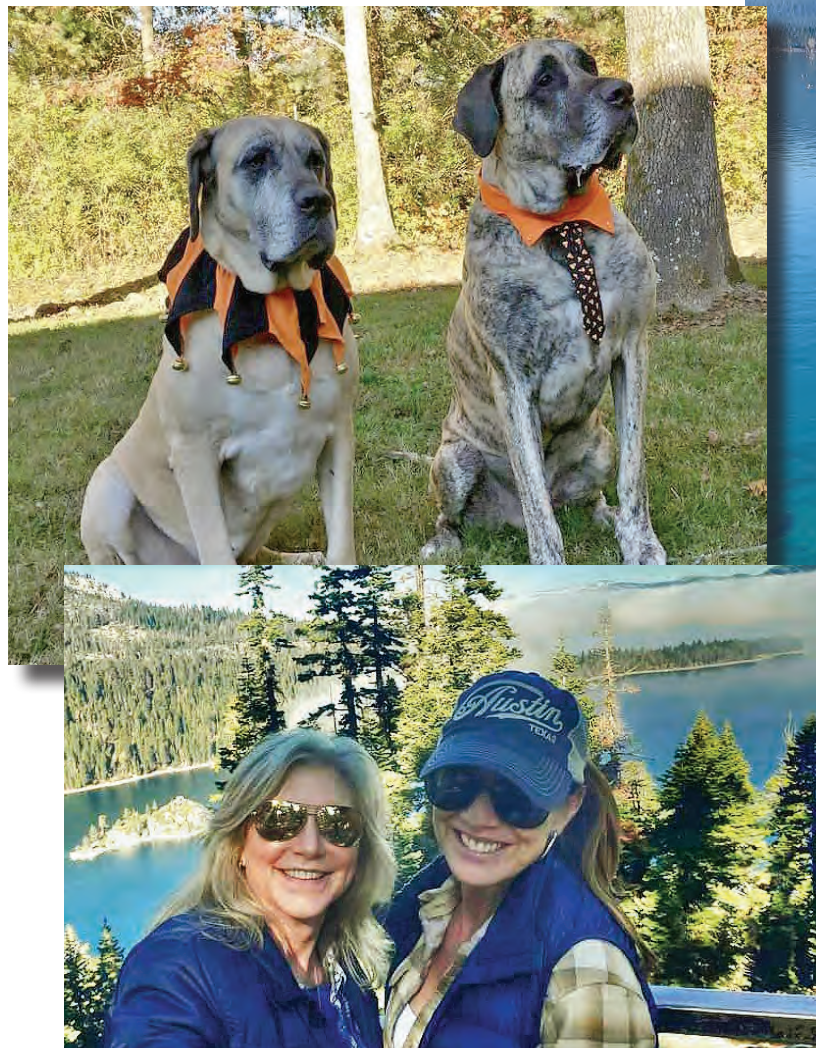
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In addition to support of family and friends provided to Kathie Williamson in her fight to beat lung cancer — (shown in photo below on left and in right photo enjoying a recent trip to Lake Tahoe, Nevada, with best friend, Lisa) — she said her two dogs, American mastiffs named Winston and Willow (right), provided hope and comfort on the home front during rough cancer-battling times.

“I lived for them. They gave me so much love, joy and strength and kept me getting up each day, especially Winston,” Williamson said. “He was so intuitive with how I was feeling and was just the sweetest.”

Photos submitted



Williamson

From page 1C

Three months later, Williamson resumed her role as director of human resources for an insurance company located in Knoxville, but continued receiving treatments due to cancer recurrence.

There currently is no evidence of disease.

“The cancer came back three times,” she said, noting a total of 13 chemotherapy treatments and 58 radiation treatments to date, as well as ongoing immunotherapy. “But this coming January, it’ll be another two years of being cancer-free.”

‘Finding silver linings’

For Williamson, keeping a sense of humor in the midst of her diagnosis was paramount.

“I’m a pretty positive person and I love to laugh, even if that means laughing at myself,” she said. “Radiation, for instance, was really hard on me, but I’d just tell myself that it’s time to go tanning.”

She also has strived to be as open as possible about her journey, posting updates on Facebook to keep friends and family informed about her diagnosis and treatments. Additionally, as Human Resources director, Williamson said she seizes every opportunity to engage with employees experiencing similar journeys and offer various resources and understanding.

“I’ve been an open book this whole entire journey, and some really great moments have come out of all this,” she said.

One such moment was not too long ago, when Williamson’s boss acknowledged how her transparency has helped normalize the disease at their workplace.

Breast Cancer

From page 4C

recently “rung the bell” signifying she’s cancer-free — and for his father who passed away from pancreatic cancer.

To raise money, Adams held an event honoring one of his heroes, singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett, who also died of cancer. Admiral Title also

“Cancer is so common now — we all typically know someone who’s gone through it or is going through it — but it’s not always a death sentence,” she said. “So I think it really helps to be open and bring people along on my journey. ... Because if someone looked at me now that my hair and eyelashes have grown back and I no longer look ‘sick,’ they would never know all the side effects I’m experiencing. It helps them to be a little more understanding if I’m not feeling well.”

Sharing her journey also allows family and friends to provide Williamson with much-needed support during particularly difficult times.

“I’ve been so fortunate to have the most incredible support group, and it was unbelievable to see how much people care,” she said. “It reminded me that I need to keep pushing for them.”

Williamson said that her sister, Karen, and best friend, Lisa, have been especially supportive, traveling from Michigan to Knoxville numerous times to help around the house and attend appointments with her. She and Lisa even took a special trip to Lake Tahoe, Nevada, to celebrate a cancer-free scan in November 2021.

“Staying connected and finding silver linings is so important,” Williamson said. “I couldn’t have done it without either of them.”

Williamson’s co-workers also have played an integral part in her journey, ultimately acting as her “second family.”

“They’ve seen the really tough days and have celebrated every milestone with me,” she said. “So many of them, along with family and friends, even made #TeamKathie shirts and bracelets to wear in a show of

support” for her fight.

Williamson said she’s often looked to her two dogs — American mastiffs named Winston and Willow — for hope and comfort as well.

“I lived for them. They gave me so much love, joy and strength and kept me getting up each day, especially Winston,” she said. “He was so intuitive with how I was feeling and was just the sweetest.”

‘It pays to be stubborn’

Williamson attributed her resiliency to her “stubborn nature” and ability to understand and effectively communicate her needs to her oncology team.

In fact, per her request, it wasn’t until earlier this year that Williamson learned her doctor initially estimated a life expectancy of less than two years.

“I never let them tell me my prognosis because I didn’t want to know that,” she said. “I just feel like you have to make decisions that work best for you and speak up and be an advocate for yourself. And, sometimes, it pays to be stubborn.”

Although Williamson still undergoes immunotherapy treatments every four weeks, she remains hopeful the cancer stays in remission. Of course, there are still times of contemplation about the unpredictable time ahead; however, Williamson has fiercely chosen to not live in “limbo.”

“I try not to go down a rabbit hole of questions about ‘why’ because I can’t change the diagnosis or the cards I was dealt,” she said.

“I can’t let it keep me from moving on a path forward... All I can do is continue to always find the silver lining and enjoy life because it’s never guaranteed.”

friend to pancreatic cancer.

“I love being able to follow in Scott’s footsteps,” Watlington said, explaining that Scott had raised more than a quarter of a million dollars for breast cancer over the last several years.

The other ambassadors are Mike Witcher, who barely missed out on a spot in the top five, Daniel Hood, Frank Myers, Zane Hagy, A. Gordon



MEDIC Regional Blood Center

‘Many platelets go to help cancer patients’

Platelets, one of the essential blood components MEDIC Regional Blood Center provides to local hospitals, are small particles in your blood. They help your blood clot when you receive a cut or bruise, preventing excessive blood loss.

“Many platelets go to help cancer patients. A side effect of many types of chemotherapy causes the body to stop producing enough platelets temporarily,” a MEDIC press release stated. “Platelets only have a shelf life of five days — making them extra special because the need is constant. By the time platelets are donated, tested and sent to hospitals, they must be transfused very quickly.”

Platelet donations must be made at one of four donation centers: Farragut (11000 Kingston Pike Suite 9), downtown Knoxville, Athens or Crossville.

Because the body reproduces platelets so quickly, platelet donors can donate up to 24 times a year. Platelet appointment times vary by location.

“Donors with type A+, B+, AB+ and AB- make the best platelet donors, but those with O+ and A- blood also can donate,” the release further stated.

“Women who have been pregnant might carry an antibody preventing them from donating platelets. Although this antibody presents no risk to the person who has it, in sporadic cases it could create complications for the person receiving her platelets. All women must undergo a blood test to determine whether they are eligible to donate platelets (the blood test appointment will be a sample-only appointment).”

“Platelets are donated through a process called apheresis: If you’ve ever donated on the Alyx machine, you know what we are talking about,” the release also stated. “The donor’s blood goes into a machine where it is spun rapidly until it is separated into red blood cells, plasma and platelets. Most of the plasma and red cells are returned to the donor leaving behind a small bag of platelets.”

“The process is not painful. The needle used is smaller than the needle used for whole blood. However, the donation process may take around two hours to complete.”

First-time donors should call 865-521-2683 or 865-521-2684 to discuss eligibility and the process. Please do not self-schedule as a first-time donor.

Ongoing donors can self-schedule through their MEDIC member account or call 865-521-2683 or 865-521-2684 for an appointment.

is donating a portion of every closing they perform through Nov. 14.

Long-time ambassador Scott Brockamp of His Security & Technology recently “passed the torch” to Watlington, who currently is in fifth place. Watlington’s wife is a breast cancer survivor. He’s had several close friends survive breast cancer, and he recently lost a


Heins, Chris Bureson, Steve Gardner, Mark Mauldin, Aaron and Imelda Margulies, Jack Ryan, Jeffrey Bagwell, Richard Bettis, Tyrone Beach and Marc Anthony.

A mother, a sister, a wife, a friend — almost everyone at the event had a loved one who fought breast cancer. But this is far from a hopeless fight.

Deborah Mauldin, one of the

2024 chairs with Brockamp, is a survivor of breast cancer herself. “Because my life was spared, I am honored to be able to give back, to give people hope,” she said. “... Since I beat the odds, I want someone who is newly diagnosed to know they can, too.”

If you want to donate, go to MenWearPinkKnoxville.org.




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Victoria

From page 1C

with, but it was a journey.

"It's been hard at times," she added. "...it's been like a roller coaster.

"There are times that are really good, where you're like, 'Hey, we're doing great. Things are looking up.' And then, there are times where you're just like, 'Oh, my gosh, are we losing this battle?'"

As for side effects, "It's been an emotional strain on us at times," Andrea confided. "Basically, we're tired, but we keep going because Victoria ... she's the one that encourages us. I mean, she's so resilient.

"So even when she's not getting active treatment, it's a lot of work for us," the mother added. "So we're continuously working to fix things. ... Treatment has a lot of side effects on kids."

With Victoria, the chemotherapy made everything taste horrible.

"So she didn't really start to eat food," the mother recalled. "So, she actually has a feeding tube. And so we go to therapy twice a week, where she goes to the feeding therapy and occupational therapy to help us try to overcome that.

"So it's like a marathon that never ends."

When times are bad, "We have emotional hardships," Andrea reflected. "You don't want to cry in front of your child, so you hold that back until you have moments to deal with things.

"Or, we're always learning and studying. ... I'm always trying to figure out what's going on," she added.

Trying to juggle work and her child's illness also has taken a toll.

"So not only am I doing my job, but then I'm always looking at stuff, trying to understand what to expect and what we're dealing with as far as the LCH itself," Andrea said.

And, "there's always the financial stress of families whenever you have a cancer diagnosis because we spent most of, I would say, two-thirds of 2022 as an inpatient in the hospital," the mother said. "I mean, the chemo just has such hard effects on (Victoria) that we would spend, like I said, at least two, three weeks of every month (with) inpatient (status).

"And so we learned to try to go from the hospital to home — because she couldn't go to daycare because she was still immune-compromised at that point," Andrea added. "That is all stress and strain on the family.

"But fortunately, my job has been wonderful as far as letting me work from home or have a little bit more flexible hours to get things done."

Around Victoria, Andrea and husband/father Cruz Rocha, "We've had great support from friends and family who have dropped off meals at the hospital to make sure we were fed," the mother said.

When able, "Victoria goes to a fabulous daycare," mom said.

"Like the first 10 months or so, she was able to go to daycare; they were wonderful about informing us, 'Hey, we have kids in the building,'" she added. "That way, we can make the decision we need to take her out for a little bit or let her in. So they were amazing, and they continued to be amazing working with us."

At ETCH, "The hospital has been fabulous, too," Andrea said. "Just the communication between the doctors and the group. I mean, we've had her physician call us at 7, 8 at night to tell us great news because she's like, 'this can't wait till tomorrow. I want to share this.' So you don't get that level of care just everywhere."

Victoria underwent chemotherapy "for two years," the mother said. "The first 10 months of treatment, she was under one type of chemotherapy and steroid treatment. She was under both chemo and steroids, actually, both years.

"And about 10 months into the treatment, she stopped responding and had what they call disease progression," Andrea added. "They're basically relapsing on treatment.

"Basically, her body stopped responding to the treatment. And, we were basically down to the last three, I think, chemos."

There were more problems. "We had three more to go, and then all of a sudden, we ended up with new lesions in places we never had," Andrea said. "And so, they ended up having to restage her treatment and change chemotherapy on her.

"So we changed that treatment in 2022, and we basically ended up with close to another year or so of treatment because in April 2023, she had her last chemo," she added.

"Then in August 2023, we finally weaned her off the steroids, which were part of her treatment. But I would say as of April 2023, we knew she was in remission. She was there in treatment for the most part."

Noting Victoria was in remission for a full year, "we were just under monitoring," Andrea added, "We had her support removed, everything."

However, in April of this year, "We found a new bump on her head," she recalled. "We had that checked out, and it was confirmed with scans that that was a new lesion. So it's been like two years on and one year off, and now it's like in the middle ground, it's back on, type of thing.

"So, it's been wild," she added.

Currently, "we are under monthly monitoring, so I really don't know if we're in remission again or not," Andrea said.

"We discovered a new lesion, a bone lesion, in May, but it has shrunk on its own," Victoria's mother said. "The last time we did an MRI, it had shrunk down to 9 millimeters.

"So, the plan of treatment (is), instead of going into chemotherapy or surgery for this round, we just decided to do some monitoring because, once in a while, you'll get somebody

with LCH that if they have one single spot, they go and do something called spontaneous remission or move into that direction — meaning that their body is beginning to take care of it on its own."

The bottom line is, "She's doing good," Andrea said. "Like I said, we won't know if she's in complete remission or not until we do another scan."

Regarding another scan, Victoria's mother said they have to move around some timelines.

"We were going to do a PET scan, and we opted not to do that because she's doing so great," the mother said. "You don't want to over-expose them and potentially create, like, a secondary problem with the scans — and you don't have a lot of exposure with its own radioactivity and stuff — so we decided just to wait until it's time to do an MRI.

"We just had one in July, so we'll probably do one, I would say, maybe December or January," she added.

Regarding Victoria's care at ETCH, Andrea said, "Our family, I think, has got a well-rounded perspective because the first part of the year, the first year of treatment for the most part, we were always going to the outpatient clinic.

"That was our first experience, really, with ETCH," she added. "And so, I mean, everybody at clinic, they're welcoming, they're loving and they're just there."

When the Rochas walked into the clinic, Andrea said it did not feel like a somber place filled with sick children.

"You do see sick kids, but you don't see a lot of sadness and everything because (the staff) makes it fun for the kids as much as possible," the mother said. "You see the kids riding bicycles in the hallway or trying to be kids.

"They do the best to make (the children) still feel like they're kids," she added. "And, that is something that helps."

When Victoria arrives at the hospital, her mother said she starts walking down that hallway.

"She's like, 'Oh, I'm here to play. I'm here to have fun,'" Andrea observed. "She's not scared. The doctors, the way they approach, Victoria has no fear. She loves going there.

"Victoria likes to move a lot," the mom added. "And so, she would kick the soccer ball around the floor, hooked up to an IV pole and the nurses would see her and start kicking the ball with her and interacting.

"So, you don't have that feeling of what you get at an adult hospital, where it just feels that sterile and cold. They're warm and welcoming over there. That made the inpatient stays easier on us."

For Victoria's second birthday, she was an inpatient at ETCH.

"You know, birthdays are special for kids, so they threw her a birthday party, presents and all," Andrea said. "The doctors and nurses attended, which was really awesome.



Victoria Rocha, 2, with Dr. Susan Spiller, an ETCH physician, hematology.



Andrea and Cruz Rocha with their daughter, young cancer patient Victoria.

"Those are the experiences we've had," she added. "As far as the treatment, they are based off of protocols; so you're involved, you're told, you're guided, 'This why we're going to give the treatment.'

"I feel like they have been responsive to hearing our concerns, because LCH is considered a rare disease — I think it's like one in 250,000 are diagnosed each year with it. We work with specialists from Texas Children's Hospi-

tal. And one of the beautiful things about East Tennessee Children's Hospital is that you don't have doctors that have that arrogance that, 'Oh, I got to do it on myself.'"

Another blessing for the Rochas is not having to move.

"I've met other families across the United States that have had LCH, and they moved just to get to special doctors because they didn't have hospitals like we do here," Andrea said.



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Mellow Mushroom Breast Cancer fundraising campaign

“We are excited to share that Mellow Mushroom will be partnering with Susan G. Komen for a Breast Cancer fundraising campaign featuring the return of the fan-favorite Go Pink cocktail and Mellow Mushroom pretzels that will be served in a limited-time only ribbon shape.

Having begun Tuesday, Sept. 24, this campaign runs through Monday, Nov. 11: “\$1 from every Go Pink cocktail and every whole order of pretzel ribbons sold will be donated to Susan G. Komen, the world’s leading breast cancer organization,” a Mellow Mushroom press release stated.

“The Go Pink cocktail is made with Casamigos Reposado tequila, lime & cranberry juice, garnished with a lemon twist and a pink ribbon-shaped stir stick. ... Mellow Mushroom’s stone-baked pretzels tossed in garlic butter and parmesan will be served in a ribbon shape and served with Mellow red sauce for the duration of the campaign,” the release further stated.

“We are thrilled to be partnering with Susan G. Komen for a second year,” said Anne Mejia, senior vice president of Brand Development at Mellow Mushroom. “Our goal is to help make a significant and lasting impact in the fight against breast cancer, and our Mellow Mushroom family is honored to contribute.”



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