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Relay for Life Honorary Survivors Barb and Lisa Nuorala share their cancer journeys

By **Elizabeth Sias** on August 1, 2012 at 2:49 pm

The Isanti County Relay for Life is holding its annual cancer walk Friday, Aug. 10 at the Isanti County Fairgrounds in Cambridge. This is a community event to raise money for research for the cure for cancer. The festivities begin with a reception for cancer survivors at 5 p.m., and the opening ceremony will start at 6:30 p.m., with the survivor lap at 7 p.m. The luminary ceremony is at dusk. It is an enjoyable evening for everyone.

Cancer touches the lives of many, whether a woman successfully combating ovarian cancer, her daughter-in-law whose life was forever changed from her battle or their friends and family fighting with and supporting them along the way.

In the case of 2012 Isanti County Relay for Life Honorary Survivors, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law Barb and Lisa Nuorala, one story came to a close many years ago, while the other will be a lifelong journey.

The Isanti County Relay for Life event takes place Friday, Aug. 10, at the fairgrounds in Cambridge.

Barbara Nuorala

"Appreciate life and think positively"

In 1997, Barbara Nuorala was having trouble breathing and walking, often finding herself short of breath.

When she noticed she was having trouble eating, yet still expanding, she decided to go to the doctor.

After an ultrasound and CT scan, Barb was sent down to Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis to see a specialist the next day.

It was there she was diagnosed with stage 3C ovarian cancer. It has spread throughout her abdominal cavity and omentum.

"It's a silent thing," Barb said. "You have all these weird symptoms and you don't really realize what's going on."

Barb underwent surgery to remove her ovaries, uterus and omentum, spending nearly two weeks in recovery. At the time, ovarian cancer patients had a 25 to 30 percent survival rate, Barb's husband Marv said.



Barb and Lisa Nuorala, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, are two of three 2012 Isanti County Relay for Life Honorary Survivors. Photo by Elizabeth Sias

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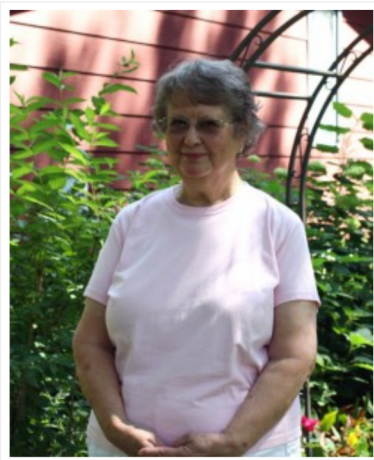
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Barb Nuorala

After several months of chemotherapy treatment, however, Barb went into remission. There hasn't been a sign of cancer growth since. Barb has been cancer-free for 14 years.

"I've been so fortunate to be alive these last 15 years to watch our grandchildren grow up," she said. "As bad as cancer can be, there's always good things that come out of it, because you learn to appreciate every day, and you learn to take time for yourself."

Barb, 73, grew up in South Dakota, but she and her husband have lived in Cambridge since 1964 and raised three children. Now retired, Barb first worked at Control Data in Cambridge before commuting to the cities to work.

While undergoing cancer treatment, she was out of work for eight months.



"At first you don't think you're ever going to come out of it," she said. "Every day gets a little better. It changes your whole outlook on life. You just appreciate things."

When she started feeling better, Barb got a job with Advanced Telemetry Systems in Isanti, where she stayed for 9 years.

She said she's been involved with Relay for Life for several years, but this is her first time as an Honorary Survivor.

While undergoing treatment, having the support of her husband and children, as well as members of her church, kept her going.

"You realize that there are people out there who care about you," Barb said. "You just have to think positively and learn to appreciate each day that you have."

Lisa Nuorala

"Be grateful for every day"

Less than a year after marrying Marv and Barb's son Larry in December 2008, Lisa Nuorala began experiencing intense back pain.



Lisa Nuorala

It was summer 2009 while she and Larry were moving furniture into their new home that she first noticed the pain. It wasn't until that fall, while lifting a heavy bag of dog food, that Lisa experienced the worst pain of her life and went to the hospital.

One of her vertebrae had broken, and several had compressed, leaving about a fifth of the broken vertebra intact.

"It got to the point where I couldn't lay down or sit down because it hurt so much," she said. "I had to stand all the time."

In December 2009, Lisa was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a blood cancer in plasma cells of the bone marrow that leached calcium out of her bones, leaving lesions.

Lisa said it was a bad winter all around—she spent her wedding anniversary in the hospital, her son left for Iraq the next day, she was diagnosed on Christmas day and she underwent spinal surgery to fix her back just a few days later.

From her first round of an oral chemotherapy treatment, Lisa's body deteriorated. She was losing weight, vomiting and losing hair from malnutrition.

"I got down to 78 pounds," she said. "They told my husband, 'if she loses another seven pounds, she'll die.' They put me in the hospital at that point and changed my chemo. Within days, I started getting better."

Lisa, 43, now visits the Mayo Clinic in Rochester regularly for an intravenous chemotherapy treatment, which she said her body has responded to well—she's been in remission for a year.

She lives with her husband and youngest daughter in Oak Grove, Minn., and also has two children living in other states. Lisa drives down to Rochester every other month for chemotherapy once a week. She'll do this for the rest of her life, but she said she loves the staff at the Mayo.

For her type of cancer, it means the holes in her bones haven't grown larger and there are no new lesions. She takes a drug that puts calcium back into her bones to help restrengthen her bones.

"I feel really good now," Lisa said. "I have pain from the back surgery that I'll have for the rest of my life, but other than that I feel really good."

She's almost back to her normal weight, but she's three inches shorter than before her surgery because she lost a vertebrae and another six or seven are compressed.

"It's not the cancer that bothers me, it's the back pain," she said. "I can't live my life the way I used to. I can't be as active."

Being back at work to keep her mind active has definitely helped, she said. She works at home, developing computer-based courses for the Navy's flight training program.

Her husband Larry has been a huge support throughout her journey.

"I don't really feel like I'm going through all this," Lisa said, explaining she tries not to dwell on it. "My husband really helps me get through it, and my work."

When her daughter was diagnosed with Type I diabetes, Lisa said she always wished she could have diabetes instead of her daughter.

"When I got cancer, I thought 'Maybe I got this instead of my children,'" she said. "That's always kind of helped me get through it more than anything is that I took one for the kids. The one thing I've tried to do is impart as much wisdom on my children while I can."

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