

Chelene Taylor
and Steven Logan
share a peaceful
moment.

LOVE

Cancer can put an immense strain on a relationship. However, it can sometimes bring couples closer together.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE TRITT

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WITH
CANCER

Cancer can feel like

an attack on your emotions as well as your health, and coping with the effects of treatment, the anxiety about the future and the stress of the disease can be extremely difficult for couples.

Meet two couples who formed and mended loving, supportive relationships in the face of a devastating diagnosis.

"I told her how much she meant to me and how much I wanted to see her live. That brought her spirits up."

A SECOND CHANCE FOR SUPPORT

Chelene Taylor hadn't felt well for weeks. Her symptoms, which varied each day, fluctuated from excruciating back pain to a bad cough and headaches.

So when the then-21-year-old hairdresser thought she pulled a groin muscle swimming at a friend's house on July 4, 2010, it initially seemed like just another condition to add to the list—until a hard lump formed in the area, prompting her to seek treatment.

Following several visits to local health care providers, all with varying opinions on the cause of Taylor's illness, her condition was not improving.

After passing out at her mother's church, she was admitted to the hospital for tests, which revealed she had stage III lymphoma.

The doctors began to explain risks associated with treatment—difficult side effects, potential infertility—but after nearly a month of being misdiagnosed, Taylor was ready to do whatever it took to feel better.

"I said, 'OK, when do we start chemo?'"

Taylor underwent chemotherapy treatments every three weeks and was in remission for a year. And then, after finding a swollen lymph node one day on her way to a store, she learned her cancer had returned.

Devastated, she turned to her boyfriend—who had essentially moved in with Taylor's mother to help care for her during her initial bout with cancer—for support.

"When I got diagnosed the second time, things completely changed," Taylor says. "I was overwhelmed, and for

whatever reason, he basically told me, 'Get over yourself; you act like you're the only person in the world to have cancer twice.'"

His attitude made one thing clear during that turbulent time: She needed to end that relationship.

"I said, 'OK, we're done,'" she says. "I was completely heartbroken. I knew I was sick and needed to focus on me. I felt like, 'If you can't handle it, then OK, I'm not going to make you.'"

Taylor, however, wasn't alone for long. Three weeks later, one of her clients, Steven Logan, contacted her after reading a Facebook post she'd written about her diagnosis.

"I asked what was wrong with her, she briefly told me her story, and I asked her if she wanted to hang out so I could get to know her a bit better and understand what was going on with her," he says.

When Logan invited her over one night for dinner and a movie, Taylor was a little skeptical. "Really? To watch a movie? I know what that means," she says, laughing. But, she says, they spent the evening talking about her cancer, her treatment and her plans for life after cancer.

The next day, he asked her to come over again for dinner, and then the next night and the night after that. The couple's movie nights became a regular ritual, and before long, Logan started asking Taylor a new question: When will you move in?

After Taylor's three-week stem cell transplant hospital stay—during which Logan was a frequent visitor, bringing her milk and cookies and Chinese food—

she pulled up in front of his home with a cooler full of kitchen utensils and other personal belongings, making the move official.

Following the transplant, the couple's newfound bliss didn't last long. Just a few months later, Taylor was diagnosed, for the third time, with cancer.

After undergoing an alternative form of chemotherapy designed to attack cancer cells during and after treatment, for several months, Taylor was told she was in remission once again.

A PET scan taken after she experienced achiness and pain, however, revealed her cancer was not in remission.

It was after she learned that her cancer was still present that she contacted Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA). Soon after, Taylor was under the care of Istvan Redei, MD, and Syed Abutalib, MD, hematologic oncologists at the hospital in Zion, Illinois. After discussing her treatment options with her physicians, Taylor chose to move forward with a hematopoietic stem cell transplant, and the search began for a donor. However, while they searched, Taylor flew to and from the hospital every other week for chemotherapy.

Not long after submitting Taylor's information to the National Marrow Donor Program's registry, the search yielded a large number of potential bone marrow donors, including a full match. With this news, Taylor began preparing for her transplant.

Logan, still back on the West Coast, knew his girlfriend was feeling hopeful, yet also after three previous attempts to eradicate cancer—afraid. One night, after a particularly emotional phone call, he began thinking about what he could do to cheer her up.

Convinced having something to look forward to would help her stay strong emotionally before, during and after the stem cell transplant process, Logan flew to Chicago and proposed to Taylor as she lay in her hospital bed awaiting her stem cell transplant. "I told her how much she



meant to me and how much I wanted to see her live," he says. "That brought her spirits up."

Life since Taylor's transplant has had its challenges. However, Taylor and Logan say they are moving in a good direction. The happy couple were married last summer with family and friends by their side.

Although cancer has changed Taylor and the way she manages her days,

with periods of fatigue, discomfort and tiredness, she, with Logan's support, is working hard at regaining the life she knew before her diagnosis. "This has not been easy, and I don't wish this on anyone," Taylor says. "However, due to my will and the help of many others, I am hopeful for the future. And, above all, I am excited and thankful that my latest scans are showing no signs of cancer."

"I never thought that he was going through something. I was just focused on keeping things what I considered to be normal."

TESTING THE TIES THAT BIND

When Aquita Randall found a lump in her left breast in 2012, she thought it was a bruise. She assumed she'd bumped into something and waited for it to go away.

But when Randall, who works as an associate at the American College of Radiology, mentioned the lump to a co-worker, word got back to her boss, who sent her to a doctor to get a scan. A radiologist did a biopsy during the same visit; three days later, he called Randall at work to tell her she had cancer.

"I was shocked," she says. "I got up from my desk and walked around for a little bit, then went to my boss and said, 'I think I need to go home. They just told me I have cancer'—and I just broke down."

Randall called her mother, but she didn't immediately share the news with her husband, James.

"I didn't think he could handle it," she says. "It was probably a week before I told him."

At first, as Randall started treatment, the family seemed to be adjusting to its new routine. To attack what her doctors identified as either stage II or III cancer, she began aggressive chemotherapy. She scheduled treatments for Wednesdays so when the side effects hit three days later, she'd have the weekend to recover before work on Monday.

Her husband—who Randall says was concerned and supportive and repeatedly assured her they'd make it through the ordeal—drove her to each appointment.

Once Randall's treatments were done, about a year and a half after they began, James told her he'd had an affair and didn't want to try to work things out. "The issues between us happened when things were so-called back to normal," she says.

The family's life, once again, changed rapidly.

"I came home one day," she says, "and he pretty much put me and the kids out." During that first month, Randall and her children moved into a shelter. The next month, they stayed with a co-worker and eventually moved into an apartment.

Stunned and confused, Randall initially blamed herself. "In my mind, I thought, 'Maybe it's because I had the bilateral mastectomy, or because I gained weight, or because I was mean because the meds I was on make you very moody,'" she says. "I [basically] stopped focusing on the cancer at that point and started focusing on my marriage."

Although she was hurt, Randall wasn't ready to give up on her 15-year marriage. She brought homemade meals to his apartment. Every morning, she emailed him to say they were going to get through all of it. She prayed that she could forgive him and that he could forgive himself.

"Everyone else at that point hated him," Randall says. "My pastors were telling me I just needed to leave. But I kept saying, 'I don't know this person; that's not my husband.' I loved him more than the pain I was going through, and I knew I wanted my husband back."

One day, James called and suggested they meet. Sitting together at a local restaurant, he told Randall he didn't want their marriage to end.

Counseling sessions at CTCA helped the couple understand emotions they hadn't shared with each other during Randall's treatment.

Nausea, achiness and other treatment side effects had taken a toll on the couple's physical relationship; as a result, James falsely assumed Randall was no longer attracted to him. In addition, he was struggling with the fact she was ill, and he couldn't do anything about it.



Tips for Partners

Dealing with uncertainty, concern and feelings of helplessness can make supporting a loved one with cancer a challenge.

Consider the following advice:

- Accept outside assistance: Couples don't have to handle everything on their own. "People would say, 'Do you need this or that?' and I'd say, 'No, no, we're OK,'" says Aquita Randall, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012. "I needed their help. And they needed to feel like they could help me. We all needed it."
- Be a source of hope, even when your partner doesn't seem to have any: Steven Logan found it hard to watch his girlfriend, who'd already had cancer twice, be diagnosed two more times during their relationship and eventually give up hope. "I watched her struggle, I watched her cry," Logan says. "I stood by her side all the way through it."
- Focus on your feelings: "If I could go back, I'd definitely pay more attention to how my husband and kids were feeling," Randall says. "They [often] feel like they were handed the short end of the stick."

"It all came out in counseling," she says. "I never thought that he was going through something. I was just focused on keeping things what I considered to be normal. But we're in a better place now. A year and a half later, we're best friends."

Randall's physical recovery process is far from over. She will be on maintenance chemotherapy for at least seven years, which causes pain, nausea and exhaustion. After undergoing a harrowing initial 17-hour reconstructive surgery, Randall underwent the second portion of the procedure last November.

And her husband was by her side—one key reason Randall remains positive about what the future holds.

"I'm not worried about what may happen or happened before because I'm just going on from here," she says. "Instead of thinking about all the bad things—not having any vacation time or dealing with the financial difficulties of [cancer]—this is me being with my family. As long as we're together, I'm OK." ●