



When her mother was diagnosed with cancer, Donna Kay Moore began taking care of her and coordinating her treatment

My Mother's Unexpected Gift

Donna Kay Moore Discovers the Blessings of Caring for Her Mother in Her Time of Need *Written by Donna Kay Moore*



Moore had to adjust to being the decision-maker in her mother's life



Moore's mother, Sandra Gower, was diagnosed with stage four squamous cell carcinoma



With plans to undergo treatment at M. D. Anderson, Moore's mother moved to Cypress to be near her family



With plans to undergo treatment at M. D. Anderson, Sandra moved to Cypress to be near her children, Donna and Craig

In June 2008, I heard the word that no one ever wants to hear: cancer. My mom, Sandra Gower, had been suffering from problems eating and swallowing and was living in East Texas at the time, while I was in Cypress. In hind sight, I wish I had asked more questions about the problems she was having. She was under a doctor's care and seemed to be doing fine, though, so I didn't probe. I was busy with my own family, my kids, and my job. She was fine, I thought. Only, she wasn't.

The Call that Changed Everything

The doctor first said that she had salivary stones. Surgery was scheduled to remove her left submandibular gland, which seemed to help. But a few months later, she was having problems again, so a biopsy was scheduled. Two days before the biopsy, I received a call at work from Mom. "I just called 911 to come and take me to the hospital," she told me. "I feel faint and I'm

scared something is wrong." My heart sank. I arrived in Lufkin within hours. Mom was dehydrated and her blood pressure was low. They had her on IV fluids and decided to keep her in the hospital until after the biopsy.

The morning of the biopsy, they prepped Mom for surgery and I waited with her until it was time to go. We chatted. We laughed at another patient wandering the halls with his gown opened in the back. Then they came and took her. I waited for what felt like a long time. Finally, the surgeon came to me. "Your mom is in ICU," he said. "I believe we have found a cancer, but we need to wait for the pathology reports. Please come with me." I followed him to the ICU, only to find that Mom was still sedated and intubated. He explained that the suspected tumor was so large that Mom's airway was compromised and they were concerned about removing the tube. They were

requesting that I give consent for them to perform a tracheostomy.

Daughter Turned Decision-Maker

I was in shock. When did I become the decision-maker here? Mom had always made her own decisions, first with the help of my father and then, since his death in 1994, on her own. I have an older brother, Craig, but he wasn't with me. The decision rested on my shoulders and I wasn't ready to make it. But a choice needed to be made quickly. I consented and the tracheostomy was done. A feeding tube was also placed, because she was unable to eat or drink.

Mom was slowly taken off the sedation and allowed to wake up. She was on a ventilator to assist her breathing. More than 48 hours had passed since she was taken for a "routine" biopsy. As soon as she woke up and realized she was hooked to a machine and could not speak, she started crying. I

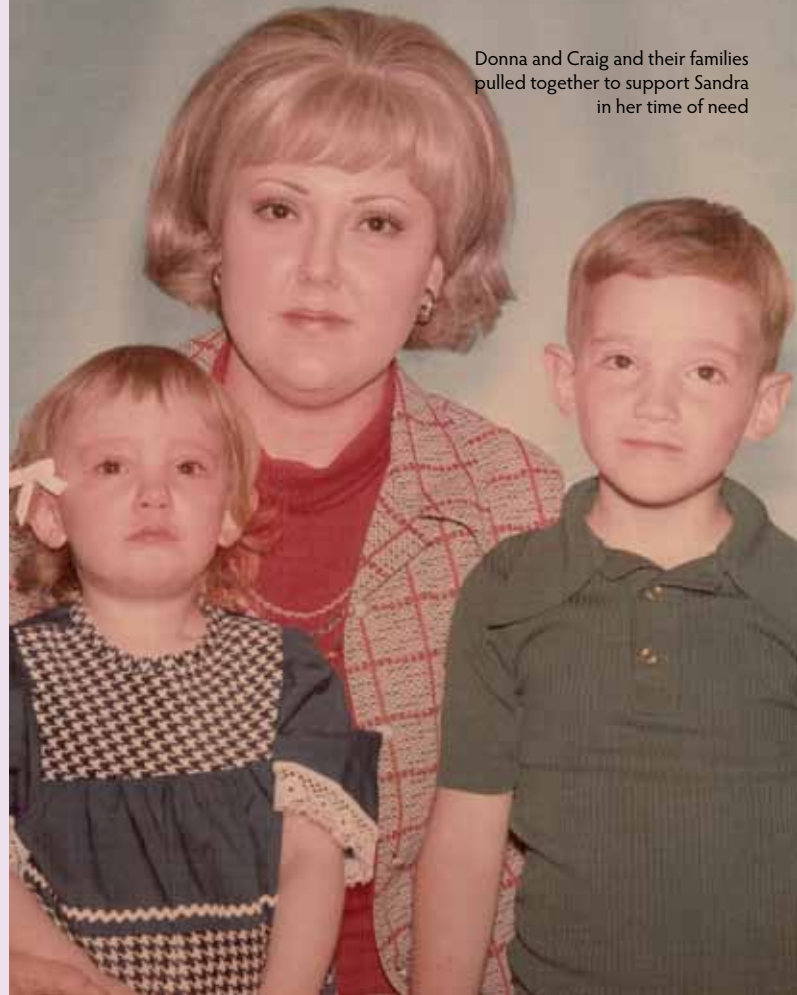
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Donna and Craig and their families pulled together to support Sandra in her time of need



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Cy-Fair Medical Center Hospital 281-897-3108
cyfairhospital.com
The support group meets on the last Tuesday of the month at 12:30 p.m. on the third floor in the American Cancer Society Information Center.

Dialogue Cancer Support Group
North Cypress Medical Center
832-912-3500
ncmc-hospital.com
Those suffering from cancer, along with their family and friends, can share their experiences with others. The group meets the first Tuesday of every month from 6-7:30 p.m.

I Can Cope
North Cypress Medical Center
832-912-3658
ncmc-hospital.com
The educational support group is for those facing cancer and their friends and family members.

assured her that I would get her into M. D. Anderson as soon as possible and she would beat this thing. Mom had watched both her father and brother die from cancer. She herself had smoked for 42 years, quitting only a year before her diagnosis. She immediately accepted death as her fate and started writing me notes about where her will and life insurance policy were located. I refused to listen.

Within a few days, I had packed her essentials and moved her in with my brother in Cypress. She received a diagnosis of stage four squamous cell carcinoma originating on the base of her tongue. She became a patient at M. D. Anderson and a course of treatment was decided upon.

Making It Work

Overnight, it seemed as though my world had changed. There was a shift in my relationship with Mom and our roles with each other. I somehow became my mother's keeper, managing her appointment schedule and coordinating her care. Between my sister-in-law, my brother, and me, someone always drove her to her appointments. My sister-in-law was with her a lot during the day and became her personal shopper. I was extremely grateful for her help.

All along, I was still trying to care for my children and family while holding down a job. I had to juggle my schedule to make things work. My husband was often taking care of our kids on his own, while they inquired about where I was. My mother-in-law was a lifesaver, stepping up to help even more than usual. I took over the handling of all Mom's affairs. I kept her checkbook, paid her bills, and maintained her home in Lufkin. After trees fell on the roof during Hurricane Ike, I handled getting the roof repaired and then finally handled the sale of the house. I was overextended and my nerves were frayed.

One Day at a Time

To be completely honest, there were times of anger - not anger at Mom, but at the cancer, the turn of events, and the hand life had dealt her and, as a result, me. I never thought I would be caring for an ailing parent and two young children at the same time. I didn't have the energy to do it all. My new mantra became, "One day at a time." We were blessed in February 2009 to hear that the tumor was greatly reduced. She was able to have the trach tube removed, for which she was grateful. We moved Mom out of my brother's home and into an independent living facility for seniors. We enjoyed several calm months

before learning that summer that the tumor was growing back. Mom opted to try a very aggressive course of chemotherapy, which made her extremely ill.

We were told the chances of the chemo curing her were remote. It might buy a little time, but that was all. After that, Mom elected to stop all further treatment. The following months were unremarkable. I visited her apartment often and made sure she had what she needed. I brought my girls to visit her regularly and she enjoyed spending time with them.

Blessing in Disguise

At Thanksgiving, she took a turn for the worse. Then, she bounced back and we had a wonderful Christmas together. Shortly after that, her condition spiraled downhill again. She became disoriented, could no longer manage her medications and tube feedings on her own, and was falling down frequently. The reality of her decline set in and decisions needed to be made about her care. She needed someone with her 24 hours a day.

Ultimately, my husband and I moved her into our house. It required some rearranging that my children, at 4 and 5, did not really understand. "When is Nana going to get better?" they would ask. When we moved Mom in on Jan. 18, we expected it to be for a few months. We hired a nurse's aid to be with her while we worked and we cared for her in the evenings and on the weekends. Mom seemed to do better at home with us. She got to see my kids everyday and I saw the smile they brought to her face, even on the night before she died. In the early hours of Feb. 6, Mom lost her battle with cancer. My husband and I were both by her side for the final hours.

While the 21 months that my mom battled cancer were extremely hard, I feel blessed that I was able to care for her the best way I could, in the same way she always cared for me. It was a special time and I will always cherish it. Caring for mom when she needed me most was an unexpected gift.

CFM

DONNA KAY MOORE hopes her story serves as inspiration to other families affected by long-term illnesses.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Cy-Fair Magazine would like to thank Donna Kay Moore and her family for sharing their story of compassion and hope.



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