



# ★ Tammy Gilster ★

Successful ... — CANCER —  
**SURVIVOR**

**Nurse Tammy checking a patient's vitals at the UCC School of Nursing.**

Cancer can happen to anyone. She has seen it many times in her career. Now, she is experiencing it. Tammy Gilster is a palliative care nurse at Mercy Medical Center and an adjunct instructor at the Umpqua Community College School of Nursing. She is currently celebrating six months of being cancer free. This is her story.

Before becoming a nurse, Tammy was a paramedic. An on the job injury required her to pursue a different path. While working as a monitor technician in a hospital, she earned a degree in public health and was about to pursue a career as a Gerontologist when her employer in California offered to fund her education to become a registered nurse. She currently holds a degree in nursing and a BSN from the Western Governor's University in addition to her public health degree. Tammy moved to Oregon about 15 years ago and has been practicing at Mercy Medical Center for 10 years. She is currently heading up the hospice and palliative care nursing program at Mercy Medical Center in Roseburg.

*~ Palliative care is type of care that is focused on providing relief from the symptoms and stress of a serious illness. The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family. ~*

Being an experienced nurse Tammy noticed some changes in her body. "I was fatigued and began experiencing some abdominal pain. It was kind of a silent pain and not debilitating. During my regular check up I told the doctor that something was just not right. My pap smear test came back normal so my gynecologist conducted an ultrasound and discovered a tiny mass on my uterus", she explained. A biopsy was conducted and the test results came back positive for uterine cancer.

"When I received the diagnosis, I had a huge fear of the unknown. I went through about 20 different possible

trajectories of decisions and outcomes. Being a medical professional helped me. Often times, physicians and staff are required to tell you the worst case scenario and the best case scenario and reality is usually somewhere in middle. Of course, all the normal feelings for shock and sadness happened to me. More sadness than shock, for me. It can happen to anyone," Tammy shared with us.

Tammy's treatment plan was a well researched collaborative effort between physicians. The first step was laparoscopic surgery and insertion of a mediport for chemotherapy, followed by three aggressive treatments. The chemo treatments were administered once a month for three months. Next, was six weeks of radiation therapy, one treatment per day, five days per week. The last step in her treatment plan was three more rounds of chemotherapy. Fortunately for Tammy, her cancer was detected in the very early stages and she was in very good health going into treatment. She responded so well to the treatment protocols the third round of chemotherapy was not needed.

During Tammy's treatment, she experienced some nausea, anorexia and gastric distress and met with the Ally Godfried, the dietitian at the Community Cancer Center. "She gave me food choices that worked really well," Tammy pointed out.

"I was able to work both jobs throughout my entire treatment at The Community Cancer Center. I would walk from Mercy down to the Community Cancer Center and walked back to work after my treatment. It was not bad at all. One of the biggest struggles I had with cancer was the financial fear of how much it cost to go through

treatment and whether I could continue working. I was fortunate to be able to take on extra hours to pay for my cancer treatment. The



financial stress is scary for a lot of people and I see that as a nurse. But I do have to say that every provider has been more than accommodating in dealing with the financial stress," she said.

"When you are diagnosed with cancer people don't know what to say or how to act. Many would tell me they were sorry, become tearful and want to hug me. It was wonderful, but some days it would make my sadness worse. I think a great way to help is to ask do you need anything or do you want to do something fun and not think about cancer? Your friends and family really want to help you. I wanted to be tough and not let people in and that's not a good choice. You need to ask for help. It is important to have someone you can express yourself to when you are having a bad day. I received a lot of support from my friends, co-workers and the chaplains here at the hospital, along with a huge amount of support from the nurses and staff at the Community Cancer Center. They always knew the right questions to ask and could read me if I was having a bad day. I believe that the quality of care I received was as good as I would have received anywhere," she said with a smile.

When asked what she would like to share with readers, Tammy quickly responded with, "I see a lot of patients that don't do well because they don't call their doctor and let them know they are having discomfort. Your healthcare professionals want to know and they care.

Also, listen to your body. It is the reason I am alive today. If you are losing weight, not feeling well or are experiencing discomfort, tell your doctor and keep asking if you don't get an answer right away. Early detection is key to a good outcome.

Lastly, one of the most important things all people need to do is Advanced Planning which includes an Advanced Directive. Your family and doctors need to know your wishes and that you have autonomy and control over their process mentally and emotionally. We are working hard at Mercy to help educate the community on the importance of Advanced Planning. It is so much better if a patient has these choices and the process is a respectful, loving conversation to have with your family and loved ones."

Today, Tammy continues with routine follow up visits and has been cancer free for six months. In two years, Tammy will be in the 96th percentile for cure.