



**Survivor Story: Vera Morrison**  
**Deputy Chief, Decatur Fire & Rescue, Georgia**  
**Diagnosed with Leukemia & Colorectal Cancer**  
**2021**



My story is not typical... I never thought my life would be a journey that ended up with a diagnosis of cancer, and certainly not a diagnosis of two types of cancer.

I've always had right knee issues. I had cortisone injections and arthroscopic knee surgery twice. Fast forward to April of 2021, I could no longer walk without pain or falling. Now it was time for a total knee replacement at the age of 53. Preparing for surgery, I had a pre-operative lab test. I was ecstatic because I needed my quality of life back, and I just wanted to be able to walk again. I've had blood work done before therefore, so I was not expecting a call from my primary care physician. This call was to inform me that my white blood count was extremely high. So high that I needed to see an oncologist. "You may have Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. (CLL)". "WAIT, WHAT?! I have no symptoms", I thought. I had not been sick, and I had not lost any weight. Okay, I was fatigued, but aren't we all? And of course, the pain I was having exhausted me. All the signs and symptoms were not there, as far as I could tell. "This diagnosis, if confirmed, could prevent you from having the surgery due to risk of infection". It was a "WAIT, WHAT??" moment again. There was no way, I needed this surgery. I needed to walk, to go shopping, to get out of the bed, to go to work, to drive. All the things we take for granted, I needed to do them then more than ever. Needless to say, I did have CLL, and my Orthopedic Physician did all they could to help me get this surgery. I began consulting with several oncologist and narrowed it down to two. One was from the Gwinnett system, and the other was from Piedmont. I was seeing them both

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because one did tests the other did not. I wanted every result I could get. We needed to get to the bottom of this.

I had the surgery and it was a success. (I am a miraculous healer). I had pain meds and rehab. I relied heavily on the rehab, because the goal was to walk again free of pain. I took pain meds once. I couldn't rely on pain meds because I had to work, and work requires driving and I drive a city vehicle... so no pain meds for me. I was feeling great, my knee was healing well, and I was functioning. YAY! Summer time was here. I thought, "Let's travel with my new knee, I can walk the theme parks now!" Well, that lead to pain meds. Too much too soon.

Soon I was planning my niece's June wedding and was ready to dance the night away with my new knee! And boy did I (she's my favorite niece). But it was back to work on Monday. I was feeling good, no pain... but I am suffering with bathroom issues. You see, pain meds can cause constipation. I had lost some weight, but I was always dieting. I was tired but after a long day's work, but I am not alone in that. I was still having constipation, and small narrow stools. Oh, and let's not forget, I have CLL (a blood cancer).

Now the bathroom issues were over and I'd crossed another bridge, but I couldn't stop going... I was going so much I started to see blood. Well, I thought that was normal especially, after being constipated from the pain meds. I ate and I would immediately have to go to the bathroom. Now there was a drop of red blood in the toilet. "I know, I have had hemorrhoids in the past... that has to be it!" But to be safe I phoned my PCP. Because they are great, I was seen the same day I called. So Dr. Smith had to check me, it was ok... it was routine, right? My husband was with me, and this could be nothing but hemorrhoids. The Dr. said "I don't see any blood, but just because I don't see it does not mean it's not there." They scheduled an appointment for me to see a gastroenterologist the next day. He was particularly nice considering my daughter had a ton of questions.

When I turned 50 in 2018, I had a fabulous party. I intended to have a colonoscopy, but I assumed I could do that later, because later will always come, right?? I had to tell this doctor that I had not had a colonoscopy three years ago as I should have, but he agreed I was relatively healthy outside of the blood clots I had in 2017. He suggested we do a colonoscopy so we could see what's going on and get to the bottom of this blood.

In July 2021, I had the colonoscopy. I wake up from anesthesia and ask the anesthesiologist if everything was okay. She replied "I'll let the doctor come and tell you, I don't want to steal his thunder". We both laughed, and the nurse looked at me funny, as if nothing was funny. She continued my paperwork and said "I'll tell you this, he had to do a biopsy". Then she walked out. Again, "WAIT, WHAT??"

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I was waiting for the doctor to come and talk to me. Other nurses had asked if he had come by to speak to me yet. I was alone because we were dealing with COVID, and no one could have a guest with them in recovery. The nurses became upset that I had not seen him. The doctor performed two additional scopes before he came to speak to me. "You have a tumor in your rectum and it's malignant. I sent it out for biopsy...I'm pretty sure it's cancerous." Then he left the room. All the nurses came to console me. They told me I would be alright. I wasn't crying for myself... I was crying for my granddaughter, who only has me.

Luckily for me, I had an appointment with the Gwinnet oncologist, and I could take him the information that was given to me with the hope that he would do something about it. He received the results and gave me some pamphlets on colon/rectal cancer and said he would have to stage the tumor. I would see him in two weeks.

Two weeks later, I am there to receive the staging. He said maybe one or two, while I was checking out. He never told me in the room... he gave me the paper results and told me to make another appointment. Needless to say, I went with the Piedmont Group.

Dr. Samantha Shams moved very quickly. I was set up to see the surgeon the very next day. I had an appointment with the radiation oncologist two days after that. I made my appointment with Dr. Feldman and he was also great and informative. He said, "You have stage III rectal cancer." We spent an entire hour going over everything, including the next steps.

First, I needed to decide if I wanted surgery, then radiation, then chemo. I was getting two of them for sure. I did radiation first for seven days, which started August 23, 2021. I lost a tremendous amount of weight. Who knew what to expect with radiation? I did not, and I never heard stories of radiation, except it burns your skin. I was told I would have skin breakdowns, fatigue, and maybe something that feels like a sun burn (in there). Well thankfully, none of that happened. I was fine. I didn't really mind being a size 2, but I looked unhealthy. Two weeks after that, September 13, 2021, I began Chemotherapy. 8 cycles, administered every two weeks for two hours, in the office with hands and feet in ice the entire treatment, then 48 hours of infusion at home. That pump was depressing. I could not take hearing it inject that lifesaving medicine inside of me. My WBC's would drop to levels that wouldn't allow me to get treatments, and of course I counted the weeks until I would be done. The December stop date turned into January. I had no side effects from the chemo. I ate very well after each treatment. I did not lose hair as the doctor stated, but it did get thin. I suffered with no neuropathy during or after treatment. I did have an extreme allergic reaction 20 minutes into my 8<sup>th</sup> and final treatment with my tongue and lips swollen and throat closing up. Tripod breathing the whole nine! This was a side effect from the chemo, which was reduced twice because of low platelet counts. Six out of eight doses were reduced, and the drug I needed the most (the eighth treatment) I did not complete. I was worried and scared because if the tumor responded well to the chemo and radiation, I may not

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have had to have surgery... which comes with a colostomy bag. How could it be effective if I didn't get all the chemo that was required? I was on the curative path, and that's where I wanted to stay.

Late January, 2021. I had follow up MRI scans to see how the tumor responded (Ernie was the name of the tumor). Stage III versus Stage IV is a matter of the tumor perforating that last layer of lining within the rectum. According to the MRI, Ernie had done just that. Not only did he grow past the last layer, it was in my cervix, and I had several swollen lymph nodes that looked "suspicious". They couldn't rule out metastasis. "WAIT, WHAT?!" All the chemo and radiation had been for naught. No response to treatment. It happens, some portion of the population doesn't respond. No ringing of the bell. It's the DNA of the tumor. I was definitely headed to surgery, the last step to eliminate Ernie. Again, Dr. Feldman was there for all the questions... even the dumb ones like "Will this be outpatient surgery?"

I had to see a GYN Oncologist. All my insides had to be removed. If by chance Ernie had invaded my cervix, I now had rectal cancer in my cervix. Well, if you remove the cervix you no longer have rectal cancer in your cervix. Two surgeries for the price of one anesthesiologist, let's do it!

Dr. Feldman and Dr. Gattis had worked together and performed this double surgery many times before me. But this is ME! I had a surgery date of February 3, 2022. Dr. Feldman decided that he needed to perform a flex sigmoidoscopy before surgery. He had never seen the tumor for himself. He couldn't feel it upon digital exam (which is a good thing). He wanted to know how big the tumor was and where it was located since it had grown. I appreciated him wanting to see for himself so that surgery could be optimal. This Piedmont group did not waste time... I was scheduled for a flex sig within days.

I woke from the procedure... my husband was there and nurses were telling us that I did well. Things look great. "WAIT, WHAT?!" Ernie has taken over and I did great. Dr. Feldman heard me talking and came over and said "Great you're awake!" These words! "The flex sig went well. The tumor is no longer there. There is a small piece but I can easily remove it." "WAIT, WHAT!!!!" YES, the tumor did respond to the treatment. The MRI was an over-read and was inaccurate. Now I was faced with whether or not to have the GYN procedure. I don't need it, but what if? Double surgery, let's do it!

February 3, 2022. I woke up in my room. It was dark... when I went to surgery it was morning. Surgery took longer than expected. My lips are swollen and bleeding from tube in my mouth during surgery. And now I have this bag attached to me. And the pain. I was in so much pain I cried. A week- long stay in the hospital and I had to learn to deal with this bag. Surgery went well and the tumor was removed, but this bag! I did not want to look at it or deal with it. I knew it would be temporary, but what's temporary?

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Well, temporary for me was two and a half months. This was not without leaks or accidents. Never mind having the urge to use the bathroom knowing you should not. The hospital stay wasn't unpleasant, but after the reversal I had to walk around with an open wound that wanted to close on the outside well before the inside was completely healed. I made it through all of that. Most would say the hardest part was over.

Then the fun began! The three month follow up scans were good; I expected the next three months would be as well. The fun I was referring to was eating and related complications. The long-term effects of radiation are very real, and most times you do not hear about these issues. Eating becomes a challenge when your system is forever changed and you don't know how certain foods will react. This is now a daily struggle that may or may not get better. It makes it hard to be active because there will always be a need to be able to access a bathroom quickly.

Like most of you, I could never have imaged I would be telling this story. There is so much that goes into the treatment of cancer. If we all were aware of the consequences of delaying, maybe we would get checked when we should. While I know that predisposition can play a part, early detection, having a good team, great support, and being an advocate for yourself can certainly change your outcome.

I want to share my story because most people just don't hear a lot about these other types of cancer. We often hear about breast cancer, but we can't forget about the whole body. Women don't just have breasts and it is so important to trust your body when it tells you something might be wrong. As much as I went through, I know that I am extremely fortunate that we caught this disease when we did. So many others did not and are not here to share their stories...I don't want you to be one of them.

Still surviving,

Vera Morrison

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