American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
Volunteer Story: Katie Torrence (Malden, MA)
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"I am in my 5th year since my pancreatic cancer diagnosis. I am thriving. Early detection and precision medical care are the difference between living with a cancer diagnosis and dying from a cancer diagnosis. Because of research, that can be done."

In July of 2020 Katie knew something was off. Her symptoms were vague and mild enough that she may not have noticed much if it wasn't so early in the Covid pandemic. She was working from home and motivated to see her extremely compromised mother, so she tried to find a cause for her malaise.

Following a negative Covid test, she made a virtual appointment with her doctor. Initial testing revealed an extremely high liver function test, so she was referred to a liver specialist.

It was the summer of 2020 — she expected to be told to lose weight and control her pandemic drinking. Instead, the specialist revealed they had found a mass and had every reason to believe it was pancreatic cancer.

As many do, she immediately looked up survival rates for women her age diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. What she found was terrifying — a devastating three percent survival rate. She vowed to never Google anything related to pancreatic cancer again.

The initial days following her diagnosis were a blur. Within a week she was scheduled for an endoscopic biopsy, and stents were going to be inserted to help her blocked bile ducts. Following the initial procedure, Katie developed pancreatitis and was hospitalized for five days. Her care team came to her bedside to talk about her treatment options. It was the same day that her mother, fighting her own battle with two different types of cancer, entered hospice.

Throughout her treatment, she had 12 rounds of chemotherapy, 10 rounds of radiation, 20 rounds of oral chemotherapy, and more Covid tests, blood work, and CT scans than she can count. She underwent a Whipple procedure and missed two full months of work.

Despite the terrifying initial search results, Katie had many factors working in her favor. Her cancer was found incredibly early, and with aggressive treatment her doctors were optimistic. Katie also knows better than most the importance of cancer research and development — at the time of her diagnosis, she was working at MIT. Her team was part of a consortium focused on gene and cell therapies that were soon to hit the market. As someone with cancer, Katie has signed up for every research study she was contacted for — with the hope that if something could be learned from her experience that could benefit others, she wants to make that happen.

Katie's cancer diagnosis at the height of the global pandemic truly demonstrates how far health care has come. Her early diagnosis came about through telehealth visits, bloodwork, and imaging. She was not physically examined by a medical professional until she met with a liver specialist in person. Despite these challenges, her cancer was caught early, and a care plan was swiftly implemented. Her first appointment with her provider was July 20th. By September 3rd, she was starting chemotherapy. There is no time to waste with

advanced cancers, and research helped inform Katie's treatment so she can get the best care.

Key to her progress has been the use of biomarkers in her treatment plan. Biomarker testing allows doctors to determine which drug, out of a basket of options, would be the best to try first for every individual. This can significantly cut down on experimentation and increases odds of survival. Again, because of her work, Katie knew biomarker testing and the precision medical care she was able to receive would make a tremendous difference in her journey. Katie felt she was on the path to recovery: "I knew the importance of receiving the correct treatment the first time, instead of trial and error."

She and her care team can track her response to her personalized treatment through the CA 19-9 blood test. A normal range is <35. Just after she was diagnosed, Katie's level was 190. Despite a brief spike early in her treatment, her levels have continued to drop throughout her treatment and have been in the normal range since spring of 2021.

Katie views biomarkers as an investment in the development of new treatments; their use can lead to more and better therapies, leading to more and more cancer survivors. The terrifying Google results do not have to be the end of the story.