

Through a Season of Healing and Discovery

BY BRENDA BRAVATTY

My cancer process and story of healing began in July 2021 when I was at my gynecologist, and I shared information about my family health history, having two brothers who had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2019 and 2021. The doctor strongly suggested I should undergo genetic testing and I did.

I felt perfectly healthy, and had no indication of health concerns when I met Dr. Rajesh Keswani, director of endoscopy at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. I met with him as a precautionary measure after genetic tests revealed I was at high risk for pancreatic cancer. He decided to do screening tests immediately.

Difficult Path Ahead

My name is Brenda Bravatty, I am a wife, mother, pastor and woman in ministry. I have been married to my husband, Enio Bravatty, for 34 years and together we have two wonderful children and a loving daughter-in-law.

It's hard to say who was more taken aback by the pancreatic cancer diagnosis, me or Dr. Keswani. After the procedure, Dr. Keswani sat with me and my husband and shared the shocking news. I remember he was

surprised because what he found was so small and almost undetectable. He called the next day and said the biopsy had shown I had pancreatic cancer. I'd never had any health problems, and now I was learning I had a serious disease. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. This was so unexpected and difficult to process in my mind. After watching my brothers undergo pancreatic cancer treatment and being at their side during the process, I knew the path would be very difficult.

The MRI screening results had been normal, but Dr. Keswani knew that early-stage pancreatic cancer does not cause symptoms and is hard to detect with medical imaging. He then performed an endoscopic ultrasound to look for even the smallest sign of the disease. I truly believe this was God intervening and leading him to do more testing.

Although Dr. Keswani regularly performs advanced procedures to screen for pancreatic cancer, he shared it is rare that it is caught as early as mine. He said, "I was really dismayed during her endoscopy. Brenda had a recent scan that didn't show anything, and it hits you that you're about to diagnose someone with something that

is life-altering. That is very humbling."

The God of miracles was already working. I remember the first appointments were devastating. There were times when I cried and cried at the doctor's office, listening to the diagnosis and potential treatment options.

Dr. Devalingam Mahalingam, MD, PhD, Oncologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, led the multidisciplinary team that developed my care plan. He said the

early detection of cancer gave me an advantage as I began treatment.

"It's hard to detect pancreatic cancers early, and 80% of patients present with advanced disease that is not able to be curatively treated," Dr. Mahalingam said. "Pancreatic cancer's symptoms are quite insidious, vague abdominal pain, and new-onset diabetes. Often, those don't immediately indicate the need for a pancreatic cancer evaluation."

I underwent a complicated surgery called a Whipple procedure and then took several weeks to recover. When I felt stronger, I began a rigorous course of chemotherapy that included a cocktail of three intravenous drugs administered every two weeks. There were moments when I felt like

“Go and tell the world”

I was sinking into a deep pit, remembering what my brothers had endured before me.

When I heard I needed chemo, I was shaken and fearful. The chemo for pancreatic cancer is intense, so I relied on my faith in God, my family and my friends to get through it. I was shocked, but I never questioned why it was happening to me. I understood that if God allowed me to go through it, it is because He had a greater plan.

A couple of months after completing chemotherapy, I asked Dr. Keswani a question that would change my perspective. I asked him “How often do you find pancreatic cancer this early?” He replied, “Never.” He explained to me that in its early stages, pancreatic cancer is silent and hidden. The fact that it was

The Bible was my daily companion—promises of the Word of God gave me strength and were light on this dark path that I had to endure. Bible verses, such as Psalm 118:17 became life to me, “I will not die; instead, I will live to tell what the Lord has done.” I learned to embrace suffering, a concept that was unknown to me. I had to surrender my life and my journey to His will for me. Throughout those dark days, I was intentional about seeking the Lord. There were moments where I had no strength, where the side effects were debilitating, but it was in those same moments where I had to rely on His Strength and His strong hand to lift me up each day.

During the process, I encountered many roadblocks that tested my faith.

happened to be my birthday. I was so concerned, praying for a miracle, that the masses would disappear. I remember the day of the appointment with Dr Waggoner, I was hoping to hear that the ovaries were clear, but instead of that he said that the masses could be seen by the CT scan. I began to cry, and the doctor took my hands and encouraged me saying, “Do not lose your hope, a year from now you will look back and you will ask yourself, why did I worry so much? Chemotherapy will be over, and you will be fine.”

This moment and that day were promises that the Lord was speaking over my life which have come to pass.

Despite the diagnosis, I made the decision to trust in the Lord and not worry because I knew that my life was in His hands. The Lord continuously spoke to me in various ways, and He gave me peace throughout the process of waiting.

I vividly remember one morning during the beginning of my chemotherapy treatment, I was praying at home, it was still dark outside. Suddenly I had a vision, where Jesus was holding my hand, He was walking me into the infusion therapy area at the hospital. That morning, God touched my heart, and a peace surrounded me.

That experience changed my perspective about chemotherapy. I no longer had fear, but instead, felt peace. Every hospital visit for chemotherapy treatment became a new opportunity. While I was in the waiting room, I saw people who were crying, full of hopelessness. I spoke to them about the love of Jesus and shared with them that I was going through the same journey. I prepared encouragement cards to give to patients to motivate them to have faith because I knew God cared about them. I had wonderful experiences while sharing the gospel. My heart was full of compassion, just as God has shown compassion to me.

Every time I went to chemotherapy or a doctor’s appointment, I was very positive and full of faith. I can say that the source of my strength and positive attitude was God, His presence and His power. Also, the loving care of my family and my church family were crucial to walking through this battle. The love shown by the body of Christ really

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found early is a miracle. I understood that my life is a miracle, and I began seeing my process as an opportunity.

Overcoming the Disruptions to Regular Life

My diagnosis started a year of treatment that would keep me away from the church and ministry for about 10 months. It was a difficult experience as my life as I knew it, came to a sudden halt. It felt like I was at a peak of my life with family and ministry, but unexpected events happen, and life can suddenly change, just like it did for me.

I struggled to find hope in my diagnosis. This difficult experience reinforced my faith in God, my only hope.

After the Whipple procedure, I had additional scans done and the oncologist shared that they had found masses in my ovaries and that there was a high probability that I also had ovarian cancer, secondary to pancreas cancer. The doctor explained that they could not confirm the diagnosis in the moment, but that we would need to wait seven months until chemotherapy was completed in order to undergo another surgery to remove the ovaries. I was devastated with the potential diagnosis.

I remember going to Cleveland Clinic hospital for a second opinion regarding the ovarian diagnosis. I met with Dr. Steven Waggoner, Gynecologist Oncologist. I was there on Feb. 2, 2022, which



impacted my life. This was a great opportunity to experience that loving kindness.

I had chemotherapy treatment biweekly and there was always an opportunity to encourage the medical staff and share the love of God with them. Every time a nurse performed a procedure on me, I would encourage them in their work.

I finished 12 rounds of chemotherapy in July of 2022. In September, I underwent a surgery to remove my ovaries at Cleveland Clinic. The surgery was a success, and the surgeon reported to me that there were not masses found in the ovaries. Another great miracle! Specialists were shocked at the report, members of the Oncology team at Northwestern stated that they had never seen something like this! I knew God was giving me the victory every step of the way. On Sept. 28, 2022, I was declared cancer-free!

Beauty and Purpose Out of Trials

Throughout this process, I learned many valuable lessons for my spiritual and emotional health which changed my life and ministry as a whole. After 10 months of treatment, I slowly returned to my normal family and ministry activities. God gave me a second chance of life. Understanding how deadly pancreatic cancer is, I am certain God used

the medical science combined with His miraculous power to extend my life for a purpose.

Dr. Keswani and I have been interviewed by several media outlets and news channels, because of the miracle of early detection and complete healing. He has shared that, “It’s hard to say someone is lucky when they have pancreatic cancer, but with Brenda you have to recognize the blessing of early detection,” he added “It’s a story of hope because medicine is advancing. Brenda was proactive, and it has changed her life.”

“Go and Tell the World”

I know God led me to the right doctors who would perform the necessary tests. Dr. Keswani encouraged me to “Go and tell the world what happened to you.”

My life and my ministry are not the same. I now understand that each day is a gift from God, who changed my heart through the process. I aim to live every day to the fullest! Although I give glory to God for my healing, my life is not perfect. In May 2023, my youngest brother, Vinicio, passed away due to pancreatic cancer. This process has allowed me to understand the sovereignty of God. He extended my life, but took my brother home. My eldest

brother, Gilberto, is alive and healthy.

The passion of my life is to love and serve Jesus, preach His Word and serve those in need in my community. We continue serving God as senior pastors of Casa de Misericordia Church in Chicago. In 2005, I founded Mujer Victoriosa Ministry, which is a Christian non-profit organization that aims to bring hope and healing to the hearts of women. After enduring the hardships of this process, I feel more equipped to assist women and to provide compassion to people going through difficult circumstances. I am currently in the process of writing my second book, *Through the Valley*, a devotional for cancer patients.

I have been through a difficult process. And God has been faithful. As a result, I desire to help other people through my experience. ◀

BRENDA BRAVATTY received Jesus as her personal Savior in 1978. She and her husband of 34 years, Pastor Enio, have been senior pastors at Casa de Misericordia church in Chicago since 1998. Brenda is passionate about Jesus and preaching His Word. She has a bachelor’s degree in nutrition and a master’s degree in food science, and has her ministerial credentials with the Assemblies of God.