Connie Dewbre

November 2, 2018

Brownwood, Texas

Diagnosed with Hepatitis C in 1990

The following is an excerpt from the Hep Summer 2018 cover story:

By the mid-2000s, Connie Dewbre was in her 60s and had nearly died of complications from living long term with hepatitis C virus (HCV) as well as from the brutal interferon therapy she had used to try to cure it—in vain.

By that point, she was living off disability insurance. Her son, Eric McNatt, a photographer, had moved from New York City back to their hometown of Brownwood, Texas, to take care of her. She had given up booze and cigarettes and had taken up a liver-healthy Mediterranean diet. One doctor told her she had about five years to live.

But another doctor, a resident from New York, gave her a heads-up. “He said, ‘Don’t get discouraged—there are new drugs coming,’” remembers Dewbre, 72, a retired administrator at a youth prison. “He told me to watch the internet. ‘You’ll live to see this in your lifetime,’ he said. That was uplifting to hear when I was very depressed.”

Ultimately, that doctor was right. But first, Dewbre would have a long hard road to tread. Born in Brownwood, she went to college and lived for several years in Arizona, where she got married before moving back home to take care of her parents and give birth to McNatt in 1971. While pregnant, she hemorrhaged and was given a lot of blood. That’s how she figures she contracted HCV, which wasn’t even discovered until 1989.

In the ensuing years, she found that she was tired all the time but didn’t know why. A doctor told her he thought she had some kind of unidentifiable hepatitis. By 1990, she was so sick that she started breaking out in hives. “I went to a specialist in Austin, and he took one look at me and said, ‘You have hep C—I know it.’” He put her on interferon, the standard treatment at the time, known for its harsh side effects and low cure rates.

“It was hell,” Dewbre recalls. “I know now that I’m highly allergic to interferon. I’d lay in bed unable to move, curled up in a fetal position. My mother had to come take care of me.” (Dewbre’s husband was working in another city.) “Thank God for Granny,” she says. “She’s still alive at 95.”

When that doctor told her she was cured, she moved to Waco to be with her husband and found work. Eventually, they divorced, and she moved back to Brownwood, where she became an administrator at the local youth prison. (“I’m tiny, and people would ask me how I handled those kids, but most of the young men there were very polite.”)

But in 2006, she was told that she still had HCV. She went on interferon again but couldn’t take it and quit after a month. Yet a year later, she made herself take it again after a doctor told her she had Stage 4 liver disease. “That’s when I almost died,” she recalls. “I’d been taking interferon for a week and kept getting weaker, almost comatose. My sister took me to the hospital in Fredericksburg, where they didn’t think I’d live through the night. It was the first time I’d seen my doctor cry. She said, ‘Connie, you’re going to a better place.’”

But, miraculously, she lived and woke up in the intensive care unit the next morning to find McNatt, who’d flown from New York, and her niece at her bedside. “You’re not supposed to be alive,” her niece said. “I dressed for a funeral!’”

Dehydrated from the interferon, Dewbre was in the ICU for eight days. After that, McNatt decided to stay in Texas and take care of her. “I think that stalled his career, but he wasn’t going to leave me with a home health aide,” she says.

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