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By John Peel

Rare cancer can't beat this positive attitude

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You might feel pity for Teresa Ogle. But she doesn't.



Courtesy of Teresa Ogle

Teresa Ogle, right, is grateful to Dr. Katherine Morris of Portland, a surgical oncologist, left, who diagnosed Ogle's rare disease after several other incorrect diagnoses.

More information

To help Teresa Ogle: A benefit account in the name of Teresa Ogle has been set up at Alpine Bank. Checks should be made to Teresa Ogle and sent to Alpine Bank, 1099 Main Ave., Durango, CO 81301. For more information, call Alpine Bank at 375-7689.

American Cancer Society: Call the local office at 247-0278, or visit www.cancer.org. Volunteers are always needed at the local office, said Ginna Harbison, the cancer society's quality of life manager in Durango.

The Durangoan has spent the last two of her 37 years battling a rare form of soft tissue cancer - synovial sarcoma - that created a pineapple-sized tumor in her leg.

Over the last 26 months she's learned a lot about life. She has suffered through surgeries, chemotherapies and radiation, but she doesn't ignore the bright side: discovering who sticks with you when the dice relentlessly come up snake eyes.

"You start being appreciative of very little things," Ogle said Tuesday via cell phone during a stop in Flagstaff, Ariz. She was on her way to Los Angeles for an experimental treatment. "You try to be grateful for every moment. ... Your life can disappear from you pretty quick."

Her energy buzzes through the phone your way. This coming from a woman taxed by travel, treatment and complications. You wouldn't know she's on oxygen due to a deflated lung. "It's a little hard on me. I'm nervous, I'm out of breath."

It was February 2006 when her health went awry. She collapsed walking up stairs, waited a day before going to Mercy Regional Medical Center, then was diagnosed with bilateral pulmonary embolism - blood clots in both lungs. She spent a week in the hospital, lucky to be alive.

She moved to Portland, Ore., a couple months later, and no doctor there could solve her continuing medical problems. "I don't even know how many doctors I went to."

A mass developed in her leg. A vascular surgeon told her it was a hematoma caused by a blood clot, and that a quick, easy surgery would set her right. But Ogle sensed something wrong; said she was "terrified" the night before the surgery. Her boyfriend and "hero," Wesley Stacy, tried to calm her.

Surgeons found much more than a blood clot; they discovered the cancerous tumor and started to remove it. But it was too huge, and she started bleeding badly. Dr. Katherine Morris, a surgical oncologist in Portland, was summoned into surgery. She guessed it was synovial sarcoma - the first correct diagnosis of Ogle's condition. Ogle is grateful to Morris, and believes she may have saved her life.

When Ogle finally woke in the intensive-care unit, 18 hours had elapsed. For several days she needed blood and plasma infusions to replace what she lost because of the surgery. "I lost all my natural blood," she said.

Doctors couldn't excise the entire mass. She began four months of chemotherapy, followed by surgery in October 2006 to remove more of the tumor, then six weeks of radiation.

Synovial sarcoma is diagnosed in 500 to 1,000 Americans each year, according to the National Cancer Institute. It generally affects younger adults - the median age is 26½. Synovial tissue lines the cavities of joints, tendons and bursae.

It often recurs, often spreading to the lungs. That, unfortunately, was where it was confirmed in Ogle a year ago.

So the chemo began again, followed by surgery to remove several tumors. But three months ago - and if you're feeling drained from reading about this, think how Ogle feels - the cancer showed up once more. Chemo did not seem like a healthy option.

"My body has been through the ringer with chemo," said Ogle, who moved back to Durango in 2007. Time to look for a new approach, one that wouldn't tear her apart.

Ogle went online and found something. A "proactive approach" that works by starving cancer cells. She applied for a clinical trial. These are experimental treatments, and one qualifies only when traditional medicine fails.

The good news: She was accepted, the side effects are not as devastating as chemo, and treatment is free.

The bad news: It means traveling to the Los Angeles area for once-a-week infusions, with an IV dripping the treatment into her blood. She wanted to keep her job as special needs aide for preschoolers at Riverview Elementary, which meant commuting by air; that would be expensive.

Friends and acquaintances chipped in. Ginna Harbison, quality of life manager at the local American Cancer Society office, helped by finding gas vouchers and by keeping in touch. Harbison, a cancer survivor, empathized with Ogle's case and admits to going "over and above" Cancer Society guidelines for helping people.

"She just got my heart, I guess," Harbison said. "She's so positive and so proactive despite multiple, dire situations."

The most recent dire situation came March 22 as Ogle flew home after a treatment in California. She felt weak, turned pale and her breathing became labored. By the time she reached Durango her lung was 90 percent collapsed. It meant another surgery and a week at Mercy. But her silver lining: The new therapy may be working.

Her California doctors say the clinical treatment killed one of the tumors. The tumor's demise, however, left a perforated lung.

Durango's high elevation is hard on lungs, as is flying, so Ogle has decided to remain in California during the clinical trial. Harbison's co-worker at the local Cancer Society office, Cheryl Schou, called friends in San Diego and found a place for Ogle to stay.

So, that's where she is now.

The expenses continue to mount: travel, insurance co-payments, drugs and more. Friends established a benefit account in her name at Alpine Bank.

The epic battle continues, and Ogle manages to stay upbeat.

"She has managed to keep the most incredibly positive attitude despite being scared to death," said longtime friend Audra Snow of Durango. "I've never heard her be negative. Not once."

Said Ogle: "I don't listen to the statistics. If I did I wouldn't be here. ... I've beaten every odd that's been thrown at me."

Her friends hope that finally, soon, those odds turn in her favor.

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