Deanna Ireland's Story

By Ryan Daugherty

In 2017, Deanna Ireland, 54, was working as a café manager for a local school district in Frisco, Texas. A big part of her job involved lifting heavy items and storing them in the kitchen freezers, a routine task she never had any problems with. However, there came a point where lifting became an issue and her co-workers would have to jump in and help.

"I just remember having pain," she says. "My joints and muscles hurt, but it was mostly in my upper body; I really didn't think much of it. I just thought 'something's going on' and that it wasn't a big deal."

It became a big deal once she started to notice spotting. She had been seeing her gynecologist regularly and just six months earlier they had found an abnormality. However, after testing, results came back inconclusive

She planned to see a different gynecologist for a second opinion, but as the spotting worsened, she went back to her usual gynecologist because she could be seen sooner.

What she was told came as a shock.

"I told her that something was wrong," says Mrs. Ireland. "She ran another test and, soon after, called me at home and said, 'You have cancer.'"

Mrs. Ireland was set up with an oncologist and a radiation oncologist in Dallas who told her she had stage 3B vaginal cancer. The plan to treat her included three different forms of treatment - chemotherapy, radiation, and brachytherapy.

Mrs. Ireland's plan involved five rounds of chemotherapy, 31 rounds of radiation, and a referral to UT Southwestern for brachytherapy.

Brachytherapy is a special type of radiation therapy that can be very effective for targeting

cancerous tumors. It involves the use of small radioactive sources, such as capsules, seeds, pellets, or wires that are implanted into the body either temporarily or permanently. This treatment method can deliver a high dose of radiation to a small area, thereby maximizing cancer killing while minimizing damage to nearby healthy tissues.

"He [the primary oncologist] told me that he was going to send me to the best, and that was Dr. Albuquerque at UT Southwestern," she says.

Kevin Albuquerque, M.D., FACR, Professor and Holder of the Ken Sharma Professorship in Radiation Oncology, is one of the few radiation oncologists in North Texas that offers specialized brachytherapy - specifically, image-guided, high-dose rate brachytherapy to treat tumors in the gynecological tract.

Mrs. Ireland's treatment entailed complex interstitial brachytherapy, a treatment combining template-based interstitial brachytherapy with intracavitary brachytherapy and involving the placement of radioactive sources in a cavity close to the tumor.

"Her cervical cancer type was very extensive, which is why she needed this procedure," says Dr. Albuquerque. "The alternative, had she not opted for this, would have been taking out all of her surrounding organs, so we spared that for her."

From the minute Mrs. Ireland met Dr. Albuquerque, she felt she was in the best hands. She recalls going into the waiting room "nervous and scared to death." However, Dr. Albuquerque turned that fear into confidence.

"He told me 'We're going to cure you'," she says. "Not all doctors have good bedside manner, but he does. He had my scans and showed us where, what, and how everything was going to happen. And, if we didn't do something, what would happen next."

Mrs. Ireland's pre-brachytherapy MRI scan showed good response. However, there was thickening of the vaginal wall that indicated residual cancer. She successfully underwent the brachytherapy procedure, which involved placing needles into the tumor in a special "shielded" brachytherapy operating room at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital (CUH).

This operating room has a brachytherapy machine that allows patients to receive treatments easily, as inpatients at CUH. This was very convenient for Mrs. Ireland as she received five total treatments over a three-day stay in the hospital. In the past, patients would have required ambulance transfer to the Radiation Department, a highly painful process.

Mrs. Ireland took extremely well to the procedure and experienced no noticeable pain during the actual treatments. Two important factors in getting through the daily treatments were maintaining a positive attitude and eliminating any negativity around her. She would drive herself to radiation treatments every day with her husband, which helped her feel as if she was still strong and in control of something. After good appointments, she would reward herself by going to Starbucks. During the entire treatment process, she was able to take time off work and for a few additional months after treatment as well. Her husband could work from home, which was a key factor in her recovery.

About two weeks after treatment, Mrs. Ireland says she was ready to go back to work, but was told to stay home a while longer to fully recuperate. She mentions that she started to feel better not long after the treatment needles were taken out in the operating room. Three years out, the only side effects are occasional fatigue and joint soreness, but she is currently managing those.

Today, Mrs. Ireland is retired and lives in Maryland with her husband. Her daughter is married and attending college, and she recently welcomed a new grandchild. She is living life to the fullest and can't be more thankful for the care she received at UT Southwestern.

"Ever since this treatment, I've been telling people to go to UT Southwestern," she says. "They are a cutting-edge hospital with the best people who really want to help patients. I would tell anyone to go there."