

“If you’re unlucky enough to get cancer, be lucky enough to go to Harrington.”



In 2013, 46-year-old Charlton resident Sharon Yager thought she was done with cancer treatments. The previous year she had undergone surgery and radiation for thyroid cancer at one of the major medical centers in Boston.

“When I finally finished treatment, I thought I would slowly start to feel better and regain my energy,” she says.

Yager’s energy levels, however, remained the same, and she felt worse, not better.

When Yager brought these concerns up to her oncologist during follow-up appointments, they were brushed aside. Since Yager had her thyroid removed, she was on synthetic hormones, and her doctors attributed her low-energy levels to her body adjusting to these.

“They kept telling me that it was going to take a while to get used to,” she explains. “But in my gut, I knew something was wrong.”

In January 2014, Yager decided to get another opinion close to home. Step one? Visiting her OB/GYN, Dr. Christine Carey, at Harrington HealthCare System.

“I was way overdue for my mammogram, so I figured it was a good place to start,” she says.

Little did Yager know this appointment was about to give her the answer to her concerns, but unfortunately, it wasn’t the answer she wanted to hear.

A Second Diagnosis

During the mammogram, the technician found a fairly large tumor in her left breast.

Dr. Carey referred Yager to Harrington’s general surgery department, where she then underwent a lumpectomy performed by Dr. Colette Whitby in June 2014. After the lump was biopsied, Yager learned she had stage IIB breast cancer, which means the tumor was greater than 2 cm but less than 5 cm and had spread to her lymph nodes. The diagnosis led to an aggressive, 30-week treatment plan involving chemotherapy and radiation.

“Dr. Whitby didn’t sugarcoat the news,” Yager says. “She told me, ‘Yes, it’s going to be hard, you’re going to feel awful and look awful, but think of it this way: we’re going to take a year away from your life so you can have 30 to 35 more years of health.’ That notion got me through the toughest days.”

In July 2014, Yager started chemotherapy with Dr. Shakeeb Yunus and then Dr. Christopher Seidler as her oncologists at the Cancer Center at Harrington. She went every other week for five months, ending that portion of treatment in November 2014.

Looking back, she reflects on the irony that such great care was so close to home, yet she had chosen to go back and forth to Boston for her first cancer treatment.

“My experience at the Cancer Center at Harrington was very different from my previous cancer treatment in Boston,” she says. “Being in such a bright and peaceful place did a lot to boost my spirits during a pretty depressing time. Everyone from the second you walk in the door to the second you leave is just wonderful. You get to know them all, and it becomes sort of like your own little community. I knew they were rooting for me. I didn’t get that personal touch in Boston, and it really meant a lot.”

During chemotherapy, she experienced side-effects such as hair loss, serious skin problems, and a weakened immune system.

“It was very challenging,” she explains. “But Dr. Yunus and Dr. Seidler treated each problem as it came along. They always took the time to explain why it was happening and what I could do to make myself more comfortable.”

During this time, Yager found a flyer in the Harrington resource room for the “Look Good Feel Better” program, a service program that teaches beauty techniques to cancer patients to help them manage appearance-related side-effects.

“The Cancer Center has so many resources,” she says. “From information on support groups and programs to more practical things like blankets and pillows you can use when you go in for treatment, they have everything. The Resource Room was a really big help.”

After Yager finished chemotherapy, she started 33 days of radiation with Dr. Thomas Fitzgerald from the affiliated 21st Century Oncology on the first floor of the Cancer Center.

“The radiation department was just as wonderful as the oncology department,” she says. “The nurses and technicians had this really great sense of humor, and they would play music they thought I would like. I just felt like everyone really got me.”

It’s been eight months since Yager had her last round of treatment, and in September 2015, she finally got the news she had been waiting to hear:

“I’m cancer free!” she says, laughing.

Yager says her energy is now back to where it was before, and she has returned to her position as the Council on Aging Director for the town of Shrewsbury. She enjoys spending time with her husband, children, and grandchildren.

“During what was the scariest and most difficult time in my life, every single staff member at the Cancer Center did what they could to make it the best situation possible,” she says. “Having everything in one place so close to home took a lot of stress out of treatment. I never had to worry about finding parking or traffic jams. The convenience of it all really made a difference.

“The hospitals in Boston do amazing things, and they save so many lives, but it’s not for everyone, and it’s not for me. If you’re unlucky enough to get cancer, be lucky enough to go to Harrington.”

“I never felt rushed. I never questioned what they were doing. I felt really comfortable.”

At 38 weeks pregnant, Linda Sanborn didn’t stress too much when her husband, David, was deployed by the National Guard to Vermont for three days.

“I thought, ‘No problem. He’ll be back in plenty of time,’” recalls Sanborn.

But no sooner had he left than Sanborn began experiencing contractions. She called her doctor at the Harrington Physician Services OB/Gyn office. They told her to come in to the Southbridge Family Birthing Center—and it wasn’t long before Sanborn was in labor.



“I was so nervous. I had no idea what I was going to do [without my husband there],” she said.

But she gives credit to the entire staff on the Harrington Maternity, Labor and Delivery floor.

“The nurses were all so attentive and sweet. They could relate to my situation. Some of them have family in the reserves, so they really helped calm me down and get through it,” Sanborn said.

Sanborn gave birth via C-section to Neo, her second child. She delivered her first son, Drake, who just turned 4, at UMass Memorial Health Care in Worcester. But she said the difference between the two facilities was incredible.

“At UMass, I just felt like a number, like just another patient in a hallway,” Sanborn said. “But [at Harrington], the nurses went out of their way to provide such personal care. I was amazed at how different the experience was.”

From the care she received at the OB/Gyn office during her pregnancy to the support after her surgery, Sanborn said she has nothing but positive things to say about Harrington.

“I never felt rushed. I never questioned what they were doing. They walked me through everything,” Sanborn said. “The staff, the nurses, the doctors... They are all capable of taking care of their patients. I felt really comfortable.”

The nursing staff even helped Sanborn when she was ready to be discharged by contacting the Red Cross, which released Sanborn's husband so he could come home and be with his family.

"I would tell anyone that if they want more of a personal care experience to definitely go to Harrington," Sanborn said. "I have no complaints at all."

**"The doctors, nurses, and staff are absolutely outstanding.
They went above and beyond."**



Joann Grindle, 74, of Southbridge, is no stranger to Harrington Hospital. She worked here for 20 years as a home health aide coordinator in the homecare division. Now she works for Overlook Life Care Community in home care, where she has been for the past 10 years.

When Joann found a lump on her neck, she immediately called her primary care doctor, Dr. Paul Harrington.

"I had lost a lot of weight and found a lump, so I made an appointment and saw his nurse practitioner, Carleen McQuaid," she says.

They decided to biopsy the lump, and the results came back negative; however, they still decided to surgically remove it. Then they sent the biopsy for

more tests, and it turned out positive for Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Already familiar with the doctors at Harrington, Joann says her decision to choose a cancer care center was easy.

"I knew that they had a very good oncology unit. I had heard a lot of good things about the doctors and the facility from my friends," she says.

Joann went to see Dr. Christopher Seidler, who reviewed her treatment plan. The first year would consist of chemotherapy infusions once a month, and after that, she would have infusions every three months for another year.

"I was very frightened," she says. "But the doctors, nurses, staff are all absolutely outstanding. They went above and beyond and made me feel comfortable. They talked me through the whole thing."

“Dr. Seider is exceptional. He has a wonderful way with people. He’s funny and very positive, which is really important. You go in there dealing with the big issue of cancer, but he put me at ease right away and made me feel that the outcome would be positive.”

During Joann’s treatment, she was attended to by Nurse Heather (*need last name*).

“She’s phenomenal. I feel like at this point we’re friends,” she says. “She always gets me a warm blanket before starting because she knows I get cold!”

As of June 2015, Joann is still in treatment and will continue with the infusions every three months for the next year. “We’re hoping it will go into remission by then,” she says.

“Having gone through this whole thing for a year now, I have to wonder why people would drive all the way to Boston when you get the same, maybe even better care, right here at Harrington. The treatment they provided me was excellent and up-to-date. I know I am getting the best possible treatment here and I didn’t need to go elsewhere.

“I certainly have a heart for Harrington. I love seeing the way the hospital is always growing and expanding. As a local citizen, it’s a very comfortable feeling to know the hospital is doing well.”