



Generations of Care

Becky White, Patient

Heide Rodgers, Physician-researcher

Becky and Dr. Heide Rodgers.

This is a story about generations.

Becky White is a Mercy patient, a Mercy Research participant – and a third-generation breast cancer survivor. Considering her family history, she says she wasn't surprised by the diagnosis, which came almost two years to the day after her mother officially went into breast cancer remission, "but I didn't expect to get it so early."

Her doctor was Mercy St. Louis oncologist and research investigator Heide Rodgers, MD, who is a second-generation oncologist. As a student, she worked in her father's office on summer and holiday breaks during college, where she absorbed her father's passion for his work and his sense of mission.

"I always knew I wanted to be a physician," she says. "That's never changed."

There was another generational resonance at work: Heide had also treated Becky's mother and seen her through her breast cancer.

Because of her family history, Becky kept a close watch on her health, with regular self-exams and mammograms.

Her vigilance paid off, but because it had already spread to the lymph nodes, her care team prescribed radiation therapy and a course of Herceptin, which, interestingly, was a product of a research study at Mercy.

"It's the drug that changed my diagnosis from 'you better get your affairs in order' to 'there's a good chance you'll make it,'" says Becky.

But even as Becky was undergoing treatment, Dr. Rodgers was diagnosed herself with breast cancer. She underwent chemotherapy while Becky was undergoing radiation. The experience, Dr. Rodgers said, gave her far greater patient perspective.

"Having gone through it myself, I'm a lot more trustworthy to patients who are apprehensive about treatment," she says. "If someone asks me, 'Would you do chemo?', I tell them that I would... and that I have."

As Becky was completing her course of treatment, Dr. Rodgers had another question for her: would she be interested in participating in a clinical trial for a new drug being developed?

"I was in immediately," says Becky.

The new drug, Tucatinib, is an oral treatment that was being developed for breast cancer survivors—one that is critically necessary.

"Breast cancer all too often metastasizes elsewhere," says Dr. Rodgers. "The blood-brain barrier can be both a blessing and a curse. It's there to protect the brain from germs and infection, and sometimes it's a little too good at what it does. It protects the brain from the effects of chemotherapy, but it doesn't stop cancer cells from migrating."

"Breast cancer often goes into the brain, bones, liver and lungs—and 10-20% of patients with Becky's type of breast cancer will see metastasis to the brain. This drug penetrates into the central nervous system, killing the cells before they have a chance to spread," commented Dr. Rodgers.

Becky was an attractive candidate for clinical trials for two reasons: first, she had a form of breast cancer called "triple positive," which is fed by the body's own estrogen, making it more aggressive. Secondly, her family does not carry the BRCA gene generally associated with breast cancer, but does carry a genetic marker of unknown significance.

Becky was an enthusiastic participant.

"It's been so wonderful to feel like I'm giving back," she says. "It's important for me to be part of the research."

And, Dr. Rodgers reports, Becky was a good patient as well.

"Becky's always smiling, always upbeat, always has grace. She's always happy," she says. "I'm so privileged to work with a woman who's so positive." Part of staying positive, for Becky, was understanding what her treatment – and the research—entailed.

"Dr. Rodgers is absolutely incredible at sharing knowledge," says Becky. "When you have cancer, it can feel overwhelming. Staying informed doesn't make it any less frightening, but knowing what my doctors are doing and using that knowledge to make decisions about my own care is so empowering. My care team gave me every opportunity to ask questions. I never felt alone."

In many ways, this bond between two women—one a patient, one a physician, one the daughter and granddaughter of breast cancer survivors, one the daughter of an oncologist, and themselves both breast cancer survivors—is emblematic of the ethos of Mercy Research: the personal aspect.

"Mercy is more patient-focused than so many places," says Dr. Rodgers. "People feel more well-tended. They're spoken to by their name. They don't feel like a number. They feel comfortable with all the people working with them."



Becky enjoying time with her niece.