

Life



CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/JOHN JAQUES

Marilyn Thurston of Pueblo is the longest known survivor of carcinoid cancer. At 79, she has lived with the disease for 35 years. The average survival is less than a decade. Here Thurston shares a moment with her great-granddaughters, Kaitlyn (left) and Madison Wallerstedt.

PROFILE

‘A LOT of HOPE’

A true survivor, Pueblo woman relies on positivity in battle with carcinoid cancer

BY AMY MATTHEW
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

The path has been rocky, to say the least. Treacherous in so many spots. Exhausting and surprising.

Any family that's dealt with a life-threatening illness knows how consuming such a physical challenge can be for the person who has it and for those who love and care for them. Yet Marilyn Thurston, after more than 30 years navigating a medical labyrinth, will use words such as adventure, hope and luck when talking about her life, and she ex-

udes a calmness — serenity, perhaps — that many in her situation would find foreign.

She'll speak about her late husband, Charles, and the journey they had together. When they started dating, the song "You'll Never Walk Alone" was popular. When Charles proposed, he told Thurston she would never walk alone — and how right he proved to be.

The beginning

The Thurstons were in the midst of raising four children in Pueblo when she was diagnosed with

Type 1 diabetes in 1970. It was a challenge, of course, and was the beginning of daily insulin shots that continue now. The bigger hurdle, however, appeared a decade later.

In the early 1980s, Thurston began dealing with multiple ailments. Doctors couldn't pinpoint a cause. Her doctor eventually ran a 5-HIAA urine test (5-hydroxyindoleacetic acid is the main waste product of the hormone serotonin) and the results were positive for rare carcinoid tumors, a slow-growing type of cancer. Thurston's

SEE HOPE, 2E



“As you can see, I've got a wonderful family. We keep in touch every day. That saves me.”

MARILYN THURSTON

Thurston says a broad support network of family, friends and doctors has been instrumental in her ability to live with carcinoid cancer.

Lessons and blessings from a life well loved



REGAN FOSTER
Life

There's no playbook for grief.

Oh sure, psychologists will tell you that the bereaved will go through five stages: denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance.

But when you get down to it, there's no right or wrong way to say goodbye. Some of us become introverts; some of us write.

I was blessed to know my late brother-in-law for 13 of his 34 years. He was legally my brother for nine. In that short time, he taught me many lessons on how to do your small part to make the world a better place. These are a few of the most significant.

Lesson 1: Always be your own person.

My brother was nothing if not an individual. He was a towering man with a big heart and a big presence, which he greatly enjoyed accessorizing with a perfect hat. I've seen him unabashedly don a jester's hat, viking horns, a bowler, Robin Hood-

style green felt hat, and driving caps (not all at once) and head out the door to whatever destination caught his fancy.

Lesson 2: Hold tightly to your family.

My brother was the consummate family man, and he considered caring for his loved ones a sacred obligation and honor.

He focused his immense talent and infinite attention on his parents, siblings, siblings-in-law, nephews and infant niece. His standard day included running errands for the folks, shepherding members of the family to various destinations,

baby-sitting the kids and calling his siblings just to say hi. He endeavored each day to let his family know they were special.

Lesson 3: Tell people you love them.

My brother closed every conversation with the most important of phrases, "Love you."

He also gave great hugs that were warm, tight and full-contact. He could not abide by the more formal one-arm, distance things; hugging my brother was like being engulfed by a friendly bear who genuinely cared about you and wanted you to know it.

Lesson 4: Everything can be made into a great story. So tell it.

My brother was a fantastic storyteller. Whether it was a yarn about missing a turn and ending up at a coffee shop 40 miles from home or a recounting of how his leg broke when he was young, he was an animated, engaging and laugh-out-loud funny raconteur.

Lesson 5: Embrace every minute you have.

My brother lived every minute of his life to the fullest. He enjoyed the happy chaos of a multi-generation family gathering, but also relished the solitude of a quiet night

in the backyard. He saw the best in everyone and everything, and his warm, kind energy brought out the best in even the worst of times.

Today and always, I vow to take his lessons and endeavor to apply them to myself. If we were all to take these simple steps, imagine how much brighter a place this world could be. It's already a better one because he was — for however long — a part of it.

Regan Foster is a reporter, writer and closet idealist. She can be reached at rfoster@chieftain.com or 404-2758.

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A rose is a rose — except when it comes to gardens



LINDA McMULKIN
Lawn and Garden

Gardeners love roses but often struggle to keep the shrubs happy during the summer heat.

Finding the ideal amount of water and nutrients to maintain plant health and protecting the plant from common insects and diseases requires observation and planning.

Roses are on the list of species that were damaged by the November freeze, with dead canes

and suckering from the roots a common theme. I suspect that many of those plants have been replaced and became well established during the spring rain.

What a rose shrub needs depends on its type, where it is planted and the expectations of the gardener. Some rose species are considered xeric and need fewer resources to look good. Other species require fussing to thrive in summer heat. Arranging rose bushes by water and maintenance needs allow low- and high-maintenance roses to be cared for separately and both types will be happier.

In general, non-xeric

roses require regular irrigation and fertilization, and frequent inspection for aphids, spider mites, powdery mildew and other pests. But defining “regular” and developing a maintenance plan depends on your soil conditions and the weather. Clay soil holds water better than sandy soil, changing how often you need to irrigate. Rich, well-amended soil has more nutrients available for plants, meaning less-frequent fertilization.

Aphids and spider mites have been problems on my roses at home. Both are relatively easy to control with a strong stream of water to wash off the pests. Pow-

dery mildew and black spot are common disease problems in rose beds with poor air circulation or that receive overhead irrigation that wets the leaves. Japanese beetle, rose curculio and thrips are possible summer pests. CSU Extension has fact sheets on each of these pests at ext.colostate.edu/index.html.

There are abundant books and Internet sites on rose care, but it is important to know where the author is from to evaluate how relevant their advice is for the unique growing conditions in Colorado. For local information on rose care, check the publications on PlantTalk Colo-

rado at ext.colostate.edu/pltk/index.html or the Denver Rose Society at denverrosesociety.org/.

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The 2015 Pueblo Farmers Market has moved from its longtime home at Midtown Shopping Center to El Pueblo History Museum. Market days remain the same, every Tuesday and Friday from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Vendors include local vegetable and fruit growers and crafters. Fresh bread, honey, cut flowers and prepared food also are often available.

The market is managed by volunteers from the Colorado Master Gardener program. Proceeds from the farmers mar-

ket are used to provide educational scholarships to local youths. CMGs will be available at the market to answer questions about gardening, including problems with roses, turf, tomatoes, weeds, insects and any other issue.

For additional information on summer gardening, contact your local CSU Extension office. You can reach the Pueblo office by phone at 719-583-6566 or email at linda.mcmulkin@colostate.edu.

Linda McMulklin is the horticulture coordinator at the Colorado State University Extension office for Pueblo County.

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had gone undiagnosed for about four years.

Carcinoid tumors are neuroendocrine, meaning they form from endocrine and nervous system cells. They produce serotonin, histamine, insulin and cortisol, which causes carcinoid syndrome — flushing, diarrhea, wheezing and heart damage. Fewer than 3,000 people are diagnosed with the tumors each year.

“They were running every test they could back then and finally did exploratory surgery (to find it),” Thurston said. “There was a tumor on the outside of my intestine.”

A surgeon removed the tumor, her appendix and a section of her colon, but doctors later found that the cancer had metastasized to her liver.

Mind over all

Only two types of chemotherapy were available and the treatments made Thurston so ill she chose to stop even though there were no other options. Her oncologist told her nothing else could be done and she would die within three months.

Then came the first of what the family says were many serendipitous occurrences. The same day Thurston made her decision to stop chemo, she and Charles were watching the evening news and saw a story about Dr. Nicholas DiBella, a Denver oncologist who was conducting clinical trials for, of all things, carcinoid treatment. In 1986, she became part of the first trial for Sandostatatin, a drug created to control the release of the hormones. Thurston still takes the injections.

“There were 50 people in the first clinical trial she did,” said her son, Ron. “She is the only survivor.”

Thurston, 79, believes her endurance is all in her mind.

“Dr. DiBella said when your mind quits, your body quits. So I never give up,” she said. “He said always have something planned, whether it’s a trip to the mall or a trip around the world. That’s why we started planning the trips to Vegas.”

She and Charles became frequent visitors, heading to Nevada about every three months, as her health and participation in clinical trials allowed. Charles’ retirement from CF&I in 1984 proved to be another fortuitous event, as he was able to take his wife to doctor appointments and



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES

Thurston still lives in the South Side home she and her late husband, Charles, bought more than 50 years ago.

become an expert about her condition and care.

He also became a master of the Vegas system, so much so that they rarely spent their own money and the longtime casino employees became personal friends. Their other ventures included trips to South Carolina to visit son Bob, family cruises and a Disney vacation.

“We always saw her drive and motivation,” said Ron. “She wasn’t going to say, ‘I’ve got cancer. I’m done.’ She’s shown us you don’t let a bump in the road slow you down.”

Medical marvel

Thurston may be the longest-surviving carcinoid patient in the United States, if not the world. In those with tumors that have metastasized, survival usually is about a decade. Thurston has had tumors throughout her gut and in her ovaries, lungs and liver.

“There are so many tumors in my liver, they don’t know how I’m still alive,” she said.

She’s been the subject of medical papers and attended medical seminars throughout the country. She was a bona-fide rock star at such gatherings, but the doctors weren’t her target audience.

“When I was diagnosed, I gave the doctors the OK to give my phone number out,” she said. “Every time someone else is diagnosed, they can call me. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve talked to over the years.”

Helping others

In addition to the diabetes and carcinoids, Thurston has dealt with thyroid and breast cancer and mini-strokes (from Interferon treatments).

She has congestive heart failure, limited kidney and liver function and other side effects from radiation and chemotherapy.

“My stomach looks like it has chickenpox,” she said.

That’s the result of an-

other experimental radio-embolization therapy to dissolve her liver tumors. With each trial she’s agreed to, she’s done so not simply to see if it will help her, but to provide doctors with knowledge that will benefit others.

“Her life is about

people. She viewed this whole thing as something she can do to help other people,” said Bob. “It’s so unusual to see that sort of attitude, as opposed to people who are just always down about how life has treated them.”

Thurston acknowledges her many medical issues with a small shrug — and a smile.

“It takes less energy to smile than cry,” she said.

Keep walking

Charles died in January, several months after the couple celebrated their 60th anniversary with a huge family party. Thurston’s grief is palpable.

“I lost my husband and that kind of knocked the soup out of me,” she said. “But I’m coming back.”

As Charles promised, she doesn’t walk alone. Her home is bustling with visitors. In addition to her sons Bob, Randy and Ron (daughter Judy died in 2010), some of the couple’s 10 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren usually can be found there or talking with her on the phone or

online. Family pictures dominate the house.

“As you can see, I’ve got a wonderful family. We keep in touch every day. That saves me,” said Thurston.

She sees DiBella every few months and is proud to say he had to devise a new way to recognize her tenacity.

“He has pins he gives to patients for each year of survival, but he didn’t have one for over 20,” said Ron. “He had to create one just for her.”

“I tell her in every way, shape and form, she’s beaten this cancer,” said Bob. “She’s having other complications, but she beat it.”

DiBella’s advice continues to guide Thurston. Each day she has something on her agenda, whether it’s a phone call, a visit or planning another trip to South Carolina.

“I’ve got so much to live for,” she said. “We need to let people know there’s a lot of hope out there.”

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COURTESY PHOTO/BOB THURSTON

Marilyn Thurston and her husband, Charles, were married for 60 years.