

A Dulcimer Love Story

A look behind the scenes at a musical couple who both have cancer

January 3, 2020 By [Bob Barnett](#)

“We are armature musicians (hammer and mountain dulcimers, bowed psalteries and harmonicas) and enjoy playing in the waiting room to help the other patients relieve stress and relax a little.” So read a short typewritten letter—a rarity these days—that arrived at my desk last July. It was from Gary Brunk, of Sapulpa, Oklahoma. His wife, Janice, the letter explained, had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma 16 years prior and was undergoing chemo again, while Gary has had prostate cancer for four years.

An intriguing story. So I emailed Gary, and eventually, we talked on the phone. I happen to like folk and roots music, and, although I didn’t know what all those specific instruments were, I’ve always enjoyed the lilting charm of the dulcimer. Gary and Janice once had a dulcimer-based band, it turned out, and Gary turned me on to some dulcimer YouTube videos from contemporary artists who were pretty smokin’.

I asked Gary whether he’d write a first-person essay for Cancer Health magazine about their musical outreach. “I’m no Hemingway,” he cautioned me, but agreed to give it a shot. That story, “Dulcimer Harmonies,” is included in the winter 2020 issue of Cancer Health. You can read it [here](#).

We stayed in touch. One of the deep pleasures of being the editor of this magazine—indeed, it’s an honor—is getting to know people who have found a way to embrace life and love even as they face the toughest challenges of cancer. Their stories grace the magazine. But becoming friends also means getting news when their health journeys become harder.

In August, Janice fell and broke her hip. She started to heal and was walking with a cane. But then a few months later, she came down with pneumonia and was hospitalized for several weeks. She also suffered delirium.

About a week before Christmas, Gary emailed me again and asked when copies of the magazine would be out. “Thought maybe it would be nice to show her when she’s coherent,” he wrote. As it turns out, we had just gotten print copies, so we mailed out a few that day.

On Christmas Eve morning, I was lucky enough to be cc’d on a family email that Gary sent around (he is fine with sharing it publicly). “Jan had a great morning yesterday,” he told their kids and other relatives, although “she faded in the afternoon.”

As for Gary himself, he had a small epiphany. “Got home late, did the laundry and went to bed about 10. Woke up at 1 asking the question, WHY should Jan spend this Christmas alone in the hospital, and I spend it home alone? Couldn’t think of a good reason, so I bailed out of bed, dug my old traveling ditty bag out of the closet and I’m off...to go shack up at the hospital with my honey bunny for Christmas. Merry Christmas to all of you, from us!”

Then, on Friday, December 27, I got one more email from Gary. “When I showed Jan the article you did about us in your magazine, she squealed with delight like a teenager...then proceeded to show it to her doctors and nursing staff all day long. It really made her day.” He went on to let me know that he’s looking forward to having her transferred shortly to a rehab facility and then “starting to play music again.”

From all of us at Cancer Health, thank you for letting us share your stories. They help us see what really matters in this life.

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