

Thanking her care team, fighting for those less fortunate

Nancy Nelson found great joy in life. Her devotion to nature, photography, travel and the people she loved crystallized during her treatment for pancreatic cancer, with the help of her team at the Regions Hospital Cancer Care Center. She also had a fierce passion for justice, which guided a financial contribution to the center's care.

Nancy was diagnosed in January 2019 and was referred to Bal Jahagirdar, MBBS, a HealthPartners oncologist. "He's more than just a highly skilled and intelligent doctor. He's a compassionate, spiritual man," said Russ Nelson, Nancy's husband of 51 years.

Dr. Jahagirdar worked with Nancy to ensure her treatment fit her needs and goals. When her first doses of chemotherapy left her feeling very ill, Dr. Jahagirdar dialed back the doses to make them more manageable. He encouraged her love of travel and scheduled treatments around several family trips. He also formed a close working relationship with Nancy's providers at the Mayo Clinic, where she underwent two procedures.

During treatment, Nancy was not as healthy and active as usual (she ran half marathons at age 65), but she nurtured her ability to find happiness. This was embodied in her increased love of photography and her book, *Joy: Finding Joy in Everyday*.

In February 2020, Nancy was cancer free, but within four months the disease was back. "Pancreatic cancer is an insidious disease and it caught up to her," Russ said. Despite the best efforts of her care teams, she entered HealthPartners Hospice care in July 2020.

"The hospice care was superb," Russ said. "Hospice and nursing aids checked in with her regularly so she could be with family and friends."

Nancy died on August 5, surrounded by those she loved most. "She told our grandkids, 'When you see hummingbirds and butterflies, that will be me.'"



Russ and Nancy Nelson in Prague

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Before Nancy passed, she completed the book *Gratitude*, dedicated to the Regions cancer care team. The couple's contribution to the team's care was inspired by this gratitude and Nancy's fight for those less fortunate. Whether it was the 15 years she spent at Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP) or her time on several nonprofit boards, Nancy always advocated for those with less access to important services. This fit well with the gift to our cancer care.

"Regions provides superb medical care to everyone, including the poor and communities of color" that are less well served by the medical establishment, Russ said. Among other things, the couple's contribution is helping the Cancer Care Center provide for the basic needs of patients facing financial difficulties and fund a nurse navigator, who helps patients navigate an often complex system of care.

"Nancy touched thousands of people. Her example motivates me every day," Russ said. He has stayed active, working with a few of Nancy's favorite nonprofits and as a community leader in the business world. He's even writing a children's book. Russ has also offered his volunteer support of Regions Hospital Foundation. Russ himself is grateful for the care he received at Regions in 2016, when he had a kidney removed. "Regions is wonderful institution."