

**Testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging Field Hearing  
“Pancreatic Cancer: Fighting the World’s Toughest Cancer in Alabama and  
Nationally”  
November 15, 2019**

**Hillery Head**

Good morning, Senator Jones and members and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to share my family’s story. `

My name is Hillery Head, and I am a mother, a business woman, and native Alabamian. I am also a widow from pancreatic cancer.

In the spring of 2016, my husband, Giles Perkins, began feeling under the weather. His health declined rapidly, and none of the antibiotics he took seemed to help. I urged him to see my primary care physician, who ran him through a battery of tests, diagnosed him with Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer. It was the day before our eldest child graduated from high school.

Of course, we were stunned. The only reason I believed the diagnosis was that it offered an explanation of how Giles had gone from an active and vibrant 48 year old to a jaundiced invalid in a matter of weeks.

Always realists, Giles and I faced the fact that our family had to learn how to live with cancer, quickly. In the same manner we had approached problems throughout our 25 year marriage, we weighed what was in our favor, and what was not.

No doubt, we had a terrible diagnosis.

But we had also a number of things in our favor:

- Giles and I had 3 healthy, sane children,
- Two of our children were old enough to drive and help out
- We had supportive friends and family close by
- University of Alabama Birmingham , a world renowned Comprehensive Cancer Center, was 2 miles from our home
- Dr. Selwyn Vickers, a renowned pancreatic cancer specialist, was at UAB, and helping us
- We both worked jobs that allowed flex time,
- We had very little personal debt
- We had first class health insurance, and we knew it would remain in place throughout the course of the disease.

In many ways, we literally faced this terrible diagnosis with the world in our favor. We were acutely aware of how lucky this was.

And so, we started down the path of living with cancer. Chemo started, and Giles responded well. With our children, we made a conscious decision to live each day as a gift, and not to mourn Giles until he was truly gone from us.

Fighting the disease was very difficult. Chemotherapy is poison, and the effects of the poison (while it drove back the cancer), took away Giles' ability to hear, caused debilitating pain in his legs and hands, and made mobility an issue for a previously active 48 year old.

The stress and trauma of watching Giles battle this illness, took a toll on him, on me, and on our three children. Again, we had the luxury of support, through counselors, spiritual leaders, friends and family. We had the luxury of connection to our children's schools, and to Giles' doctors. People knew what was going on, and people cared.

And so the fight continued, for 3 years. When known chemo stopped working, we moved on to more experimental combinations. And when those did not work, we moved into the stage of managing pain.

"Managing Pain" is a benign term for a terrible situation. The pain was so debilitating that Giles could not think or function without massive amounts of pain medication. For those who do not know, to watch someone you love in pain is suffocating.

Again, we took stock of what was in our favor:

- UAB's palliative care group was 2 miles from our house,
- UAB's palliative care group was available to talk 24/7.
- We hired wonderful caregivers to help Giles while I continued to work.
- Giles could tolerate high doses of pain medication, and he continued to work from home.
- Giles' brain continued to be sharp, his spirits remained high, and he continued to want to live

Despite all that was in our favor, on December 2, 2018, Giles passed away. He died in our home, surrounded by family and friends and people who loved him.

He fought this disease, from beginning to end, with every fiber of his being. He knew, and I knew, how very lucky we were, in the midst of this great misfortune.

And so I leave you with these thoughts:

Cancer doesn't care

- how young you are,
- how educated you are,
- how good your job is,
- how rich you are,
- what your religion is,
- how many marathons you've run,

- how much your children need you.

Cancer doesn't care.

So, it's up to us to care. It's up to us to support, to fight, to fund, to help, to love, and to live every day like it is a gift from God. It's up to us to support families facing this same diagnosis, and find a cure for this disease.

Thank you for listening to my family's story.