

'We just support each other'

Long-married couple fighting cancer is proof of how having a support system helps

Life doesn't always go as planned, and Fred and Neva Smith know that all too well.

The couple from Alton, Illinois, has weathered their occupations, Fred's military service, raising a family and now – cancer journeys. Neva is a breast cancer survivor who's giving back through an OSF HealthCare support group, while Fred has battled squamous cell carcinoma and lymphoma.

The two are a testament to how a good support system – whether that's your spouse, friends or your care team – can help in the fight against cancer. That was apparent to the Smiths in August of 2024 when Mission Partners (employees) at [OSF Moeller Cancer Center](#) in Alton gave them a wedding anniversary surprise they won't forget.

Fred and Neva's journeys

Neva Smith, 83, was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2015 and later had a lumpectomy, a procedure to remove part of a breast or breasts. She came to OSF for radiation treatment.

"I came out of that really well," Neva says.

At first, she was hesitant to join the Caring Circle support group at OSF Moeller Cancer Center. But she soon saw the benefit of expanding her support system and being a support for others.

"It's been wonderful," Neva says. "We feel like we're all sisters. We love each other. Everybody doesn't sit around and be sad. Everybody's happy and loving."

"They're like family," Fred adds.

Family – literally and figuratively – is a word Fred Smith, 88, knows well, too. After his diagnosis around four years ago, he's gotten radiation treatment on his neck and intravenous (IV) chemotherapy at OSF Moeller Cancer Center.

"The nurses were so friendly," Fred says.

"They're a wonderful couple," says Jill Pruitt, a licensed practical nurse and certified oncology navigator at OSF Moeller Cancer Center. Pruitt is another part of that support system for cancer patients.

"They're always positive," Pruitt adds of the Smiths. "They put their trust in God. They put their trust in us. No matter what news is thrown at them, they take it and go with it."

Happy anniversary

On August 1, 2024, Fred Smith was due for his first chemotherapy treatment. When Neva called to schedule the appointment, she mentioned it was the couple's 65th wedding anniversary but said there was no need to postpone the session.

What greeted Fred and Neva in the infusion bay: cake, a banner and well wishes from OSF Mission Partners.

"It was a monumental day," Pruitt says.

Fred, Neva and Jill all have the same take-home message: A support system when battling cancer is crucial, and you should find the right people and things that lift you up.

"Stay encouraged, and have friends who encourage you," Neva says. "When I had [my cancer treatment,] I listened to a lot of gospel music. That helped me."

"I always say my prayers at night," Fred adds. "It's not a religious thing. I'm just so thankful I found this hospital."

"It's very important to have someone there with you for support," Pruitt says. "Someone to give you a ride or bring you a warm meal. As you're going through [cancer treatment,] you don't always feel like cooking or cleaning your house."

Learn more

Read more about [cancer treatment at OSF HealthCare](#), including the OSF Cancer Institute in Peoria, Illinois, the hub of cancer care at OSF. If you need help in your cancer journey, contact the health system, church or social service agency near you to see if they offer patient navigators, social workers, support groups or other resources. Pruitt also says OSF and other health systems use the American Cancer Society's resources.