

Healthy Living

MedStar St. Mary's Hospital

Changing the Course of a Life.

Overcoming a Rare,
Advanced Cancer
Diagnosis.

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Supporting health, partnership, and progress.

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Dear friends,

I've been thinking lately about what it means to truly be a community hospital, and what that responsibility asks of us. I believe that it begins with the trust our community places in us, in the care our teams provide each day, and in the many ways we continue working to make health care more accessible, more connected, and more personal for our neighbors.

The stories in this issue show what that looks like in practice: patients whose experiences show the power of specialized, coordinated care. You'll meet a family who will forever be grateful for the compassion and beyond-the-expected efforts of an entire care team unit, as well as an oncology story marked by perseverance and teamwork.

You'll also see how that same commitment extends into the community through the Run & Fun Walk for Hospice, local outreach



The systemwide Miles Across MedStar Health event, featured on page 7, began in the early morning hours at MedStar St. Mary's Hospital.

and partnership efforts, and hospital improvements that strengthen care behind the scenes. Among our programs that encourage movement, our community came together this April for Miles Across MedStar Health, a systemwide event to celebrate health and unity.

The event beautifully embodied our commitment to systemness and the research-backed health and wellbeing benefits of running. It was a remarkable week that strengthened the connections across our entire care community.

What connects all of these events and stories is a simple belief: that good health care is about people, not just patients. Thank you for being part of that work with us.

Warm regards,

Mimi Novello, MD, MBA
President, MedStar St. Mary's Hospital

A final wish, a wedding vow, and a priceless gift.

Carlie Pilkerton and Clay Mitchell were planning their May 2026 wedding when Carlie's grandfather, John (Denny) Raley, 79, took ill. Denny, after a long struggle with COPD, became unable to breathe on his own and was admitted to the telemetry unit at MedStar St. Mary's Hospital, for patients who require constant monitoring. He transitioned to hospice care in late February. Carlie, who was then completing clinical hours for respiratory therapy school, understood that time was not on their side.

But what was on their side was the incredible care team at MedStar St. Mary's.

With May months away, Denny was devastated that he'd miss seeing his granddaughter walk down the aisle. But Carlie and Clay had another idea. "We'd do it wherever he was!" said Carlie.

Carlie's mother, Heather Pilkerton, and grandmother, Brenda Raley, reached out to the charge nurse and the care team, who engaged the unit leadership. The director of telemetry and intermediate care, Mladen Krstic, and the assistant director, Lindsey Perry, immediately assisted the entire care team and family to coordinate and plan the event.

"Everyone went above and beyond," Mladen says. Within 24 hours, nurses and family members arranged a wedding at Denny's bedside.

A spirit lifted

As Denny's care team cleared the way, family members began arriving from near and far. While Carlie and Clay drove in from Frostburg, Maryland, Clay's grandfather, Russell Libb—a pastor, who would be performing the ceremony—and Clay's family members made the seven-hour trip from Ohio to be present for the event.



Our telemetry associates with the bride and groom.

Even Denny got caught up in the excitement, happily telling anyone he saw about the upcoming nuptials. Carlie and her mom draped a colorful curtain and fairy lights in his room. "Grandad was ecstatic," recalls Carlie. "Days before the wedding, he was singing Alan Jackson songs to my grandmother, who he called his 'million-dollar baby.'" Denny's son Jay Raley agrees, "He seemed the most 'alive' that he'd been in some time. We witnessed some well overdue joy in Dad. I'll never forget it."

Carlie and Clay married on February 22 with 20 loved ones, plus most of the unit, in attendance. Grandmother Brenda notes, "Everyone on the third floor took part. We'll never forget the exceptional care they gave." Afterwards, nurses surprised guests with a cart filled with refreshments and flowers.

The greatest farewell gift

On the day of the wedding, Denny was fading but made his presence known by squeezing loved ones' hands. Denny passed away just a few hours later, around 3 a.m. on February 23.

The family is grateful for having had the chance to make Denny's last days so special. Jay expresses "a heartfelt thank you for the

ceremony, but just as much for the care that dad received."

"I've seen comfort in many nursing staffs," says Carlie, "but here, everyone catered to us in a way I've never seen."

Mladen explains the team's own sense of gratitude. "This is why we do what we do. Being able to meet somebody's final wishes is a very grounding experience, and rewarding in that it's a celebration of life, and not just the mourning of a passing."

Lindsey concurs. "We all value those human moments that remind us of the deeper meaning of our work. It brought us a real sense of togetherness."

"I've seen comfort in many nursing staffs, but here, everyone catered to us in a way I've never seen."

—Carlie Pilkerton, granddaughter and bride

While all present give personal thanks for the moment, perhaps Carlie's best friend Laci Welch speaks for all when she calls the experience "a day that became even more meaningful, fulfilling, and sacred than anything anyone could have imagined for Carlie and Clay's wedding."



Changing the course of a life: Overcoming a rare, advanced cancer diagnosis.

A routine colonoscopy screening in March 2025 at MedStar Health brought Donnie Estevez, 58, of Newburg, Maryland, face-to-face with a dire diagnosis he hadn't seen coming.

"It was new territory for me. I've been fortunate to have good health throughout my life with no medical issues," Donnie says. "Going into that colonoscopy, I had no symptoms to hint at what was ahead of me."

During the colonoscopy, **Umed K. (UK) Shah, MD**, a gastroenterologist affiliated with MedStar St. Mary's Hospital, identified an easy-to-miss abnormality "peeking" from behind Donnie's appendix. A biopsy indicated an aggressive, rare form of cancer known as goblet cell carcinoma (GCC), which primarily occurs in the appendix and affects only about one out of every 2 million people. It is most common in individuals ages 50 to 60.

Minal Shah, MD, a MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute medical oncologist at MedStar St. Mary's Hospital, and one of our colorectal surgeons,

Tushar Satish Samdani, MD, evaluated Donnie following the colonoscopy. They recommended standard colon cancer treatment: diagnostic scans to identify the extent of the cancer and surgery to remove Donnie's right colon, appendix, and lymph nodes (a hemicolectomy). Chemotherapy was also a possibility following surgery, depending on the stage of his cancer.

But Donnie's case was about to become far more complex.

An unexpected turn

When Dr. Samdani began Donnie's surgery, he saw that the cancer had spread into the thin membrane lining the abdomen. He quickly consulted our system chief of surgical oncology at MedStar Health, **Timothy Kennedy, MD**, who practices at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital, for his expertise in treating rare abdominal tumors. On Dr. Kennedy's recommendation, Dr. Samdani halted surgery.

"This type of cancer is an unusual and distinct combination of two common cancers that affect the appendix—neuroendocrine tumors

and adenocarcinomas. As with other cancers, the chances of recovering from GCC depend on how far it's advanced at the time it is diagnosed.

Because this cancer is so rare and, in Donnie's case, so advanced, we had no large-scale clinical trials to guide us with treatment insight," Dr. [Minal] Shah explains.

The advanced stage 4 GCC diagnosis devastated Donnie and his family. "It's hard to imagine going as Donnie did from a routine screening test and no symptoms to receiving such a grim diagnosis of a rare form of cancer with limited life expectancy," Dr. [Minal] Shah says.

A difficult road, carefully navigated

Fortunately, MedStar Health's network of cancer specialists was available to Donnie. During a consultation with Dr. Kennedy, Donnie and his family learned that an advanced treatment option called hyperthermic intraperitoneal chemotherapy (HIPEC) and cytoreductive surgery (CRS) had shown positive results for GCC tumors.

After the initial shock of his diagnosis faded a bit, Donnie took control where he could throughout his complicated medical journey. Along with his wife Vicky and their daughter Rachel, he researched recommended treatments and asked questions.

"I was hearing that I didn't have all that much time left," Donnie says. When Dr. Kennedy described HIPEC as a heated chemotherapy wash that is circulated through the abdominal cavity "like a mouthwash gargle that destroys cancer cells, I was all for it."

Dr. [Minal] Shah coordinated the next stage of Donnie's treatment carefully with Dr. Kennedy to prepare for CRS and HIPEC. She started six months of aggressive chemotherapy for Donnie at MedStar St. Mary's. A diagnostic laparoscopy would indicate whether chemotherapy had successfully shrunk the tumors.

Living life with purpose, cancer free

Once his laparoscopy, scans, and cancer biomarker blood work came back negative, indicating a positive response to chemotherapy, surgery was rescheduled to remove Donnie's colon, appendix, lymph nodes, and any tumors left in the stomach lining. Pathology from the surgical specimen showed only a small amount of viable tumor left behind, according to Dr. [Minal] Shah. "This

was a very good result. It was a successful, potentially curative surgery. I was thrilled to see he responded so well," she says.

Donnie returns regularly for routine check-ins with our MedStar Georgetown Cancer Institute team at MedStar St. Mary's to monitor his progress. At this point, he counts his care team there as friends. Recently, a circulating tumor DNA blood test confirmed that no cancer DNA fragments are present in his body. He is now considered cancer free.

"Everything is worth the fight," Donnie says. "My motto was and still is 'stay positive and move forward.' I am not looking back."

Now, Donnie takes each day as it comes, with his goals firmly fixed on the future. When he isn't working as a program manager for a local land surveyor, Donnie devotes his time to his favorite activities: playing golf, shooting pool, and spending time with family, especially his 9-year old grandson Will.

"Without the excellent care I received from all of my physicians, my story would have ended differently," Donnie says. "Dr. [Minal] Shah and her team were so proactive and supportive. I never felt like I was facing any of it alone. My experience is a reminder of how timely intervention, expert coordination, and steady physician support can change the course of a life."



Donnie's golf buddies Rusty Hamilton, Wade Johnson, and Dan Liebschutz were among his biggest supporters during his treatment, checking in on him regularly.

Meet Donnie's care team.



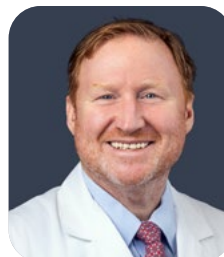
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Donnie treasures family holidays with his wife and children.

A finish line with real impact: Supporting MedStar Health Hospice of St. Mary's.

The Run & Fun Walk for Hospice is more than a community tradition. It is a shared show of support for MedStar Health Hospice of St. Mary's. Now in its 29th year, this year's event raised over \$125,000 for Hospice of St. Mary's, drawing participants for a 5K, 10K, fun walk, and Defender's Cup team competition.

Hospice of St. Mary's has long reflected a mission of compassionate end-of-life care and family support. Since its founding by several community members and longtime hospice volunteer Jimmy Dicus, the race has raised more than \$1 million in support of hospice care. Setting a record this year, Team Turbush raised over \$30,000 for Hospice of St. Mary's, becoming the highest grossing fundraising team in the event's history.

"Facing death and dying is the most difficult thing any of us will ever do," Jimmy says. "But no one has to face it alone."

As Kara Rawlings, director of Hospice of St. Mary's, explains, proceeds help support the Hospice House, a six-bed facility, along with bereavement programs and broader hospice services. "This event is a meaningful example of how a community can come together around care," says Kara.

For Mimi Novello, MD, president of MedStar St. Mary's Hospital, the race also reflects a broader truth about health care.

"Health care includes guidance, compassion, and presence all the way through the end of life," Dr. Novello says. "This event demonstrates that hospice care matters."



Joining forces to feed and care for the community.

For many people, getting help with health concerns can feel complicated. Transportation challenges, confusing systems, or simply not knowing where to start can make it difficult to access the support they need.

At MedStar St. Mary's Hospital, and across MedStar Health, community health leaders are working to remove those barriers by meeting people where they already are. An example close to home is our partnership with St. Mary's Caring Soup Kitchen, now located in the renovated Knott Family Center. This site includes a dedicated community health space that now connects residents with services and support.

"We've always worked closely with community partners," says Lori Werrell, assistant vice president of care transformation for MedStar Health. "We saw the opportunity and potential to bring health resources directly into the Lexington Park community."

The partnership grew during the renovation and renaming of the building. A gift from a community member, the late Bubby Knott, provided a permanent home for St. Mary's Caring Soup Kitchen and created space for programs designed to support residents facing a variety of needs.

As the facility was developed, our team at MedStar St. Mary's was invited to offer community health services on-site. Today, this space allows visitors to get help applying for food benefits, connecting with local resources, or navigating the health system. It also offers preventive services such as blood pressure checks and flu shots.

Located along a local bus route and in the heart of the community, the site makes health services easier to reach.

Looking ahead, the team hopes to expand offerings to include health education classes, dietitian support, and a Food as Medicine initiative.

"If someone comes in needing help with a utility bill or another urgent issue, we connect them with the right community partner," says Ashley Walters, MHA, community health program manager at MedStar St. Mary's. "Our goal is to be that connector. Here, there's no wrong door."



Racers head across the starting line of this year's Run & Fun Walk for Hospice.

Miles Across MedStar Health: 200 miles for wellbeing.

Earlier this year, our community came together for Miles Across MedStar Health, a systemwide event to celebrate health and unity. Ultramarathoner and longtime partner and patient Michael Wardian was joined by Christopher Heydrick, MedStar Health physical therapist, and Christopher Wilde, MedStar Health chief physician assistant, as he ran an incredible 200 miles over four days, visiting each of MedStar Health's 10 hospitals and select ambulatory care sites.

The event emphasized the connectedness of all our entities and care sites, and the research-backed health



Associates pose with runners Michael Wardian, Christopher Heydrick, and Christopher Wilde as the four-day, 200-mile challenge kicked off in the early morning hours at MedStar St. Mary's Hospital.

and wellbeing benefits of running. At every stop, teams hosted unique celebrations to cheer on the runners. It was a remarkable effort that strengthened the connections across our entire care community and commitment to wellbeing—through every stride.



Summer 2026 calendar



Health Connections support groups

- **Lactation** (every Wednesday, 10 a.m. to noon)
- **Parkinson's** (second Tuesday of each month, 4:30 p.m.)
- **Stroke Survivors** (second Tuesday of each month, 1 p.m.)
- **Bariatrics** Virtual Support Group. Please call **240-434-4088** for more information.



Blood drives

Aug. 27 and Sept. 24, from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Visit [RedCrossBlood.org](https://www.RedCrossBlood.org) to register.



Childbirth and family education

Parents-to-Be Workshop

8 a.m. to 4 p.m. | \$100/couple

A one-day, in-person class includes topics on childbirth, breastfeeding, infant CPR, and practical baby skills. Call **301-475-6019** to confirm dates and to register.



Pulmonary

Nicotine Cessation program

The free six-week program helps participants stop using tobacco products. Visit [SMCHD.org/Behavioral-Health/Substance-Use/Quit-Nicotine](https://www.SMCHD.org/Behavioral-Health/Substance-Use/Quit-Nicotine) for details.



Community education

Take Control of Diabetes

One-on-one appointments with a registered dietitian. Provider order required, and services may be covered by insurance. Call **301-475-6185** to register.

Diabetes Self-Management Class

A four-week program where participants can engage in conversations about their experience with blood sugar monitoring, healthy eating, activity, and long-term management.

Healthy Next Steps Workshop

A six-week, in-person course on managing chronic conditions (heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure).

Ask the Experts - Lunch and Learn

Aug. 13, 2026, from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.: No cost.
41550 Doctor's Crossing Rd., Leonardtown, MD 20650
Population & Community Health Building



Farmers market

The community farmers market brings together local growers, artisans, and food vendors offering seasonal produce, baked goods, and more.

MedStar St. Mary's Hospital campus, Leonardtown
Aug. 14 and 28 | Sept. 11 and 25 | Oct. 9



Call **301-475-6019** to learn more or register, unless otherwise noted.



MedStar Health

25500 Point Lookout Rd.
Leonardtown, MD 20650
MedStar St. Mary's Hospital



Learn more at [MedStarHealth.org](https://www.MedStarHealth.org).

Visit [MedStarHealth.org/OptOut](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/OptOut)
to be removed from future mailings.

Investing behind the scenes to strengthen surgical care.

Some of the most important hospital improvements happen far from public view. A major renovation of the sterile processing department at MedStar St. Mary's Hospital is helping strengthen patient safety, improve efficiency, and support the future of surgical care.

"It is an investment in patient safety, surgical services, and our future," said Cynthia Dean, BSN, RN, assistant director of nursing for Perioperative Services.

The three-phase renovation project has expanded and modernized the space where surgical instruments are cleaned, prepared, sterilized, and stored. New equipment, updated workflow, and a larger footprint are helping the team process instrumentation more efficiently while keeping pace with growing surgical demand.

Generous donations also support the hospital's growing surgical programs, including robotics, which require larger volumes of complex instrumentation.

In April, the final phase of the renovation—a new sterile storage area—brought the project to completion, and a vision years in the making to reality. Philanthropic support



The renovation of the sterile processing department enables our associates to simultaneously and more quickly sterilize equipment ahead of surgery.

in patient safety, efficiency, and innovation allows us to quickly and efficiently meet care demands now—and prepare us for future surgical volume demands.



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Philanthropy](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Philanthropy) to learn more about how your support can make a difference.

**It's how we
treat people.**