

Stories Of Hope

Personal Story Rene St. James' Story

Rene St. James' Patient Diary

Rene St. James spent his life working on the railroad as a Conductor, “I was the boss of the train that I was assigned to and made sure the engineman observed the rules” he says. “It was a physical and stressful job and I inhaled a lot of diesel fumes. I don’t blame [my cancers] on the railway” says Rene, “but it sure didn’t help.”

Within a year of his retirement Rene’s life took a turn on a different kind of track. At 66 years of age he began a long and exhausting journey with cancer and the complications arising. From prostate to throat to bladder to lungs, Rene’s multiple cancer surgeries and countless radiation treatments have kept the former railroad man on a 15-year, stop-and-go struggle from diagnosis to recovery and back.

“My wife tells everybody that I’m very strong,” says Rene. “He’s a real go-getter” echoes Donna, Rene’s wife of 56 years. That strength was put to the test in the summer of 2017 when a life-threatening battle with MRSA (an antibiotic-resistant bacteria known as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) left him with a deep chill on a hot summer day and ultimately put him in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at Kingston Health Sciences Centre’s (KHSC) Kingston General Hospital (KGH) site.

Donna St. James helped her husband keep a diary of his 13-day battle with what healthcare providers often call a “superbug.” Rene’s patient journal marks key milestones in his recovery, from the “SETBACK” of a canceled intubation procedure to the “BIG RELIEF” of moving out of the ICU into his own room where a shower and a shave and a scenic walk around the 9th floor restored his hope that the bacteria had been beaten and life could return to normal.

The journal also tells the story of the sustained treatment and testing Rene received thanks to KHSC’s diagnostic laboratories working around the clock. Turning around his tests day by day, sometimes hour by hour, the labs empowered Rene’s medical team with the results that informed his care, returned him to health and got him back to his picturesque lakeside home in Wellington.

“July 13th, 2017My wife Donna calls 911... I was taken to Picton Hospital by ambulance.”

“July 14th, taken to Kingston General Hospital by ambulance. Spent 8 days in ICU (MRSA).”

“Tuesday July 18th, bloodwork sent to the lab”;

“July 19th: more bloodwork, more antibiotics, more bloodwork”;

“July 21st: removed another IV”;

“July 25th: gave me the okay to go home. Feeling very good.”

A spirit of gratitude for the care he received accompanied Rene throughout the MRSA ordeal. He credits the “fantastic teamwork” that “saved [his] life.” Today, Rene is back on the road to recovery.

Given everything he has been through, another man might want to stay as far away from hospitals as possible.



But Rene pays regular visits to KHSC as a participant in a clinical trial of medically inoperable, non-small-cell lung cancer patients. Rene makes the three-hour roundtrip to Kingston, which he admits is “tiring,” but he’s proud of his participation. “It might take up to two years to find out the results of the study” says Rene but “clinical trials only improve if people take part.”

This will be Rene St. James’ fourth winter in Prince Edward County. Donna says her husband is a “sun worshiper” at heart although snow bird escapes to Texas are no longer possible. Rene’s health struggles haven’t prevented the active couple from living life to the fullest. “We’re a big family here,” says Rene of the community he calls home, “and we take care of each other.”

As one might expect, Rene’s fondest words are reserved for his wife Donna. “I’ve got my guardian angel here” he says of the woman who slept in the chair by his bed for four days straight, until staff at KHSC were able to convince her to take a room of her own.

Among the many notations, Rene’s patient diary reads: “My wife brought me a chocolate doughnut from Tim Hortons.”

“That’s when I knew” says Donna, “that he was feeling better and was ready to go home”.

Source: University Hospital of Kingston Foundation, uhkf.ca/Your-Impact/Stories-Of-Hope/Rene-St-James-Story

(The family chose not to publish an obituary)