

A Family Finds Its Strength

The Harfsts of Easton, Ill., have bound together to fight the disease that has struck the wife and mother they so dearly love.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

“Incurable cancer.” “Stage IV non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

These phrases could bring terror to the hearts of those who receive that diagnosis. And, some folks might even throw in the towel. But when Cheryl Harfst of Easton, Ill., heard those words four years ago, she and her family vowed to fight the greatest fight of their lives.

They’ve battled three rounds of attack from this disease — even to the point of nearly losing their wife and mother. But never once did they give up. Through faith, strength and support of friends, they are finding victory against this terrible disease. And they are finding their family bond only continues to grow stronger.

Learning that life has changed

Livestock and Herefords have always been a part of life for Dean and Cheryl Harfst and their family: daughter, Gina Schwader and her husband, Scott, East Peoria, Ill.; son, Robby and his wife, Susan Shammel, and their children, Austin and Mitchell Harfst and Cassie and Katie Shammel, Ashland, Ore.; and son Jonathan and his wife, Jessica, Battle Creek, Mich.

In fact, the Harfsts were at the 2007 Illinois Beef Expo when they received the news that changed their outlook on life forever.

Cheryl says she noticed tiny, swollen lymph nodes in her neck. Because she hadn’t been sick, she became suspicious and scheduled a doctor’s appointment.

“He didn’t really think anything was wrong, but I insisted on a scan,” she says. “And I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

After researching oncologists, Cheryl determined she would prefer treatment at Illinois CancerCare in Peoria, as the reviews were extremely positive and she would be close to her daughter, Gina.

Her choice in treatment centers proved beneficial for the road that lay ahead. During a bone marrow biopsy at her first visit to the center, she discovered the true severity of the situation: her cancer was at stage IV — the most advanced level.

“Stage IV — and I had little to no symptoms, whatsoever,” Cheryl says.

Beginning the treatment

Treatment for Cheryl’s cancer began immediately with six cycles of clinical trial chemotherapy (chemo).

“Also, just before my diagnosis, my dad had died, and we had just moved my mom into a nursing home,” she says. “We had their house to sell. And I was going through chemo, too. It was a rough time.”

After this initial round of treatment, Cheryl went into remission for 15 months. And then, the cancer returned. Another clinical trial began.

“I was grateful for that,” Cheryl says. “I felt like I could help other people through the clinical trials — not just myself.”

This time, however, the trial was unsuccessful.



Cheryl Harfst has maintained a positive outlook throughout her treatment for Stage IV non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.



Dean and Cheryl Harfst (third from left and second from right) say the support of their family, including daughter Gina Schwader (right), and son Jonathan (second from left) and his wife, Jessica (left), helped them survive the most difficult moments.

“It didn’t work at all,” Cheryl says. “I began a different chemo, which was shrinking the tumors but was lowering my lab counts. Even though I was not in remission, my doctor wanted me to stop treatments for a few weeks. In December ’09, I started preparing for a stem cell transplant.”

Through the process of a stem cell transplant, a patient’s stem cells are harvested, carefully processed, cryo-preserved in dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO) and frozen in liquid nitrogen. Then the new cancer-free cells are reinfused. Cheryl was expected to spend 21 days in the hospital — in nearly complete isolation — in order to prevent the introduction of illness.

“The room is on its own air system, and only immediate family is allowed to visit,” Cheryl explains. “Visitors have to scrub in and out.”

Before she was admitted, she was required to visit the hospital every day for 70 days to flush the tri-port, which was used to harvest

stem cells, receive medications and re-infuse the new stem cells. On Feb. 18, 2010, Cheryl was admitted to the hospital for what was to be a 21-day stay.

She began high-dose chemo for two days, followed by three days of twice-daily radiation.

“After that radiation, I was fried,” Cheryl recalls. “It was like I had been out in the sun for weeks. My lips and mouth peeled constantly — inside and out. I couldn’t even use a toothbrush.”

One week later, once her white blood count was down to 0.1, she received the stem cell transplant.

“They had to ‘erase my chalkboard,’ so to speak, in order to put in the new, non-cancerous stem cells,” Cheryl explains.

The terrible day

Once the new stem cells were infused, the Harfst family believed they were on the downhill slide. But on March 10, the family

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Sons Jonathan (left) and Robby (second from left), and grandsons Austin (right) and Mitchell (second from right) remain involved in the family’s Hereford operation.



Dean and Cheryl say their family bonds are as strong as ever, after surviving this challenging experience.

experienced a moment worse than any they could imagine — a moment in which they thought they had lost their wife and mother.

“Dad got a phone call from the hospital at 2:30 a.m.,” Gina says. “Mom was being sent to the intensive care unit. He called me right away, knowing I could get there before him.”

During a simple, routine breathing treatment, Cheryl had become unresponsive. When Gina arrived at the hospital, she was not allowed to go into Cheryl’s room. Instead, she was met by a chaplain



Cheryl has lost her hair twice, due to the effects of chemotherapy. She and her husband, Dean, vowed to smile through the trials.

in the cardiac ICU (CICU) waiting room.

“Seeing the chaplain panicked me,” Gina recalls. “I had no idea what was going on.”

When Gina was finally able to see her mom, she saw that Cheryl was intubated and on a respirator. Cheryl’s response upon seeing her family was agitation.

“They had to keep her in a mostly sedated state so that she wouldn’t fight the machines,” Gina says. “That was a pretty dark time.”

The Harfst family discovered three days later that Cheryl had also experienced a heart attack during the incident, Jonathan says.

“Mom experienced a multi-system failure — including her heart, lungs and immune system,” he says.

Cheryl doesn’t recall most moments in the CICU — writing messages to family on a white board, as she wasn’t able to speak; removing her tubes on her own, in agitation; or struggling when she saw her family, Gina says.

“The nurses explained to us that Mom is the caretaker of the family and that was why she was agitated

— she didn’t want us to be upset,” Gina says. “We discovered she did better when we weren’t in the room with her.”

Dean says there were moments when the family wasn’t sure of Cheryl’s future.

“At one point, we had the entire family there,” he says. “We didn’t know if she was going to pull through. Everyone had a little question mark in their minds, because she’d already been through so much.”

Cheryl remained in the CICU for eight days and slowly but surely improved with each day. And, on her 26th day in the hospital, she was released from CICU back into her isolation room.

She underwent a surgery to clear out the sinus infection that had begun the entire infection and system failure and then began the healing process, Gina recalls.

On Day 36 of hospitalization, Cheryl began physical therapy.

“Mom hadn’t moved in quite some time,” Gina says. “She began walking the aisles of the hospital with a walker, and she began practicing steps.”

And, on Day 45, she reached the point which the Harfst thought might never have been possible — Cheryl returned home.

The new routine

Returning home was an incredible accomplishment, Cheryl says. However, although she was in familiar surroundings, life was far from “normal.”

She wasn’t allowed to mow the yard, work with her flowers or go to the barn. She couldn’t eat from smorgasbords or in crowded restaurants. She couldn’t attend church or funeral visitations, for fear of infections.

Fresh fruit was even off limits — all but bananas, which had to be washed in soap and water, then peeled by someone else.

“I had no immunity, and I wasn’t immune to childhood diseases anymore,” she says.

She recently has begun receiving immunizations for these diseases.

Throughout Cheryl's four years of treatment, she has set goals for herself. Her goal after her initial round of chemo was to attend the 2007 Illinois State Fair.

"I had missed seeing all of our Hereford friends," she says. "It was so hot, and I didn't have a hair on my head. I took my hat off — I just didn't care who saw me."

More recently, the goal for her 100-day mark after the stem cell transplant was to attend the 2010 Illinois Junior Hereford Association Preview Show, for which Jonathan served as judge.

"That was one of my first times out, and I was so glad to be able to attend that show," she recalls.

And her newest goal is to attend the 2011 Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) in Kansas City, Mo.

With each day that passes, "normal" becomes more possible. On March 8 — almost a year to the day of her system failure — Cheryl received the words that were music to her ears: the labs were normal, and she could do whatever she'd like.

"It's nice to be 'normal,'" Cheryl says. "I can go to the barn and plant flowers and mow the grass."

Cheryl calls 2010 her "miracle year."

"It's just a miracle that I'm still here," she says. "That I'm alive is a total miracle. I think my kids and my doctors believe it's because of all the prayers that I'm still here."

Faith and family

That faith is what helped the Harfst family survive the experience, Gina says. During her illness, Cheryl was never a "why me" person, she says.

"I believe she felt she could witness to so many people," Gina says. "It has strengthened her faith and her friendships."

And, Cheryl believes this experience has strengthened her family bonds.

"My family was always there — they were solid rocks," she says. "It has strengthened us, and it helps us to be aware of other people's problems — to want to help others more."

Gina agrees. She says it's much easier for her to write a letter to someone experiencing a difficult time now that she's been through this experience.

"It meant so much to us at the time, and now it's much easier to

send a card or call when someone needs encouragement or support," she says.

And that's exactly what they experienced from friends nationwide — help and support.

Support of the Hereford community

Cheryl says the support received during her hospital stay was incredible.

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Herefords: A Harfst family affair

Dean and Cheryl Harfst, Easton, Ill., and their family have a long history in the livestock industry.

"I was born and raised around livestock, and it was naturally just part of the way we lived," Dean says.

What began as an operation of dairy cattle, commercial Herefords, hogs and chickens in the early 1900s progressed to the purebred Hereford cattle operation of today.

In 1971 the Harfst family moved to their current home and began focusing on their cattle operation. At their peak the Harfst family farmed 2,200 acres and managed more than 100 cows.

When the Harfst children — Gina, Robby and Jonathan — were old enough to begin showing cattle, they became active in 4-H and Hereford events, attending nearly every Junior National Polled Hereford Show and then the Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) since they were of qualifying age. Jonathan ended his junior Hereford show career in 2005 by winning the JNHE Senior Showmanship and Herdsman awards. And, in 2006, Robby's sons, Austin and Mitchell, exhibited Herefords for the first time.

Active in the Illinois Polled Hereford Association, Dean and Cheryl served as the state junior advisors from 1994-2004, and were national junior advisors during the merger of the polled and horned associations in 1999-2000.

In January 2004 the Harfst family retired from grain farming and have since reduced their cow numbers in order to provide a more manageable operation for Dean.

Today, the Harfst family manage a dozen cows, some of which serve as embryo donors. Their market is primarily show cattle, which are sold to other purebred producers through private-treaty sales and in the Illinois Beef Expo Hereford sale. Up-to-date herd and sale information can be found at harfstherefords.com.

Dean says they've always raised Herefords because of their docility and handling ease.

"They were easy to handle from the word 'go,'" he says. "We didn't like having cows charging all over the pasture. We've never had a cow bother us."

The Harfst family also enjoy the Hereford industry because of the friendships formed, Cheryl says.

"When the kids started going to the junior nationals, we met people across the country that we just love," she says. "It's the friendship and the camaraderie that keeps us involved." **HW**



Illinois Hereford friends created these posters during the Illinois Beef Expo to support Cheryl during her stem cell transplant last February. She says the support of Hereford friends helped the entire family get through the roughest moments.



“We counted more than 235 cards — more than half from Hereford people,” she says. “I even got one just last week. And, those cards aren’t even as important as the prayers.”

Jonathan recalls the nurses at the hospital laughing about the amount of mail Cheryl received.

“She got the most mail of anyone,” he says. “It had to be rubber-banded together.”

Cheryl says the Hereford community really rallied around the Harfst family during their time of need.

“Tons and tons of Hereford friends would write,” she says. “I didn’t realize some people would send a card every week. It was just amazing. And almost all of them were Hereford friends.”

Robby says he’s appreciative of the support from the Hereford community.

“We’re grateful for all of our friends in the Hereford industry and thank them for their loving support,” he says.

The Harfst family also established a CaringBridge website (caringbridge.org/visit/cherylharfst)

to keep friends and family updated of Cheryl’s condition. To date, more than 14,000 visits have been logged, Jonathan says.

“At one point, we had 30-50 people writing in the guestbook every day,” he recalls.

Cheryl says the prayers posted through this website and notes of encouragement helped her family get through the rough times.

“We had people all over the country praying,” she says. And, she believes the prayers help to this day.

What lies ahead

As for the future of Cheryl’s condition, it’s uncertain.

“The cancer I have is incurable,” Cheryl says. “The best outcome is to stay in remission. They will never call me ‘cured.’ But, I’m not afraid.”

Together, Gina says she feels as though the family can overcome any obstacle after this experience.

“We’ve been through a lot,” she says. “Whatever gets thrown our way, we’ll just take it as it comes.”

Dean says he’s learned to appreciate every moment.

“An experience like this makes you realize how much every day means,” he says. “We should live every day to its fullest.”

Cheryl agrees.

“Your priorities change,” she says. “You don’t really care so much about scrubbing the floors.”

Someday in the near future, the Harfst family hope to move their cattle operation north — to Jonathan and Jessica’s property in Michigan. And, Jonathan says, the Hereford herd keeps their family bonds strong.

“The cattle keep our family close — we all want to know what’s going on,” he says. “It truly is a family deal. When we talk on the phone, 99% of the time, cattle come into the conversation.”

And when conversation turns to helping others, the Harfst family have a few simple words of advice.

Advice for others

Cheryl says if you’re facing a difficulty of your own, don’t be afraid to ask for help.

“Keep the faith,” she says. “Don’t be afraid to ask for help — especially for prayers.”

Dean advises you to remember you’re not alone.

“You’re not alone out there, and there’s always someone to help,” he says. “Don’t try to keep it within yourself. Sometimes, you need a post to lean on.”

Cheryl also shares a plea for blood and platelet donors. “I received 37 units of platelets and 22 units of blood, they were life-saving. Thank you to those who donate.”

The Harfst family have found that by relying on the strength of family bonds and the assistance, prayers and support of others, they can overcome any battles that may stand in their way. Yes, together, they truly have discovered their strength. **HW**