

From Diagnosis to Determination

Carolyn Kenney's Story

My name is Carolyn, and I want to share a moment in my life when everything changed — not slowly, not gently, but all at once.

I was in the middle of a normal workday, doing what I've done for years: helping others in mental health services. I had been dealing with a recurring issue — my leg swelling, hurting so badly I couldn't even touch it. I had already been to the emergency room three times in three months, and no one could tell me why it kept getting infected. But like many of us who work in this field, I kept pushing through the pain because I had clients depending on me.

One day, the pain became too much. I told myself I would run to the ER, get something for the pain, and go right back to work. But when I got there, the nurse and doctor asked me to stay. I said no — I had a client waiting. They came back into the room and told me my white blood cell count was extremely high and they needed to keep me. I didn't fully understand what that meant, but I could tell it was serious. So I stayed.

Four days later, restless and worried about work, I told them I was leaving. That's when Christina, an infectious disease nurse practitioner, asked me to wait just a few more minutes to speak with a specialist. I agreed — but I made it clear I needed to get back to my job.

That's when I met Dr. MacFarlane. He looked at my labs, looked at me, and said the words that stopped my entire world: "You have cancer". I didn't speak. I couldn't. He asked if I heard him, and all I could say was yes.



I went home that day trying to process what I had just been told — only to find out I had also lost my job. On the same day. That was the moment I cried. It felt like the world was closing in on me from every direction. But even in that moment of fear and uncertainty, something else happened. Support showed up.

When I went to Dr. MacFarlane’s office at Virginia Cancer Institute, they connected me with CancerLINC. CancerLINC helped me get my affairs in order. They tried to help with my job situation, but honestly, I was too sick and too overwhelmed to keep fighting to work when my body simply couldn’t. They helped me keep my home. They arranged rent payments for two months.

CancerLINC was there. Friends helped me keep the lights on and my car running. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like I wasn’t carrying everything alone.

Chemo was hard. I was exhausted, losing my hair, gaining weight, sick every day, and unable to work. But even in the middle of all that, the support I received helped me breathe again. It helped me put things in perspective. It reminded me that even when life knocks you down, there are people and organizations like CancerLINC who will stand with you until you can stand again.

I am grateful — deeply grateful — because I truly didn’t know what I was going to do. I was afraid I would lose everything I had worked for. But I didn’t. I’m still here. And I’m still standing.

My story is not just about illness. It’s about being human. It’s about how quickly life can change. And it’s about the power of community, compassion, and support when everything feels impossible.

Thank you to everyone who helped me hold on when I didn’t have the strength to hold myself. Thank you, CancerLINC and thank you, Virginia Cancer Institute.

