

After initially struggling with the idea of working for Cancer Care Services, Melanie Wilson has found her calling as its president and CEO.



The Fighter

Pain. Isolation. Fear. The past decade of Melanie Wilson's life has been shaped by all as both cancer patient and caregiver. Memories of those feelings help guide her as she helms Cancer Care Services.

By Judy Wiley Photo by Mark Graham

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elanie Wilson didn't even have to think about it when friends told her the top job was open at Cancer Care Services. Though she was a successful nonprofit executive and the opportunity was a good one, she wasn't interested. "I completely dismissed it."

Cancer already had gouged a painful path through her life. She'd fought the disease twice and had been cancer-free for years when first her teenage daughter and then her husband were diagnosed.

A job working daily with cancer patients at the agency, which provides everything from literature to nutritional supplements to wheelchairs, sounded like more than she could bear. "I thought it was going to hurt too much."

Wilson first was diagnosed with uterine cancer in 1999, and her prognosis was excellent — checkups were clear for two years. But in 2001, her doctor found a large tumor that had spread to her cervix.

Though her doctor can't remember saying these hopeful words because her condition looked grave, Wilson heard, "I will not let anything happen to you." Because he'd seen her through the previous bout with cancer, she was reassured. "It made me feel safe, even though I wasn't," Wilson says. She underwent daily chemotherapy and radiation, then had radiation implants.

Though she was very sick from chemo, the implants were a horror no one could have imagined — and not entirely for physical reasons.

Wilson remembers waking up in isolation, which then was standard after radiation implant surgery. She turned on the television and was devastated to see airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center towers — it was Sept. 11, 2001. Because of the isolation, she was helpless to comfort her three little girls, then ages 6, 8 and 10, or talk to anyone else about the crisis. "I felt like I was going through it alone," Wilson says. On top of that, she developed an allergy to morphine, so she was in terrific pain throughout the ordeal.

Before it was over, Wilson would have a radical hysterectomy and all the lymph nodes removed from her abdomen. After several clean checkups, "I

thought my cancer experience was over. Done."

Instead, she endured a parent's worst nightmare. Her daughter, Lauren Skillman, then 18, was diagnosed in 2008 with a rare, aggressive malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor that had spread down her neck and chest. She underwent surgery and radiation. "That experience as a caregiver was so much worse [than her own cancer]," says Wilson. "Fear mostly had me 24 hours a day."

Lauren's cancer returned and spread in 2009, requiring still more surgery and radiation.

Then, two months after Lauren's last radiation treatment, Wilson's husband, Dana, noticed he had an enlarged lymph node after dental surgery. Attuned by now to cancer symptoms, he asked for a needle biopsy, and a surgical biopsy followed. Dana, a non-smoker, had tongue cancer. He underwent chemo and radiation.

Wilson's friends, former board members at Cancer Care Services, called her about the president and CEO position after the family had moved past all the diagnoses and treatments. (Today, Wilson has been cancer-free for 10 years; Lauren, two years; and Dana, one year.)

After her initial dismissal, Wilson began to have second thoughts. Her husband suggested that perhaps their ordeals were a preparation for that very job, building a sensitivity within her to the journey that follows a cancer diagnosis.

She consulted a trusted mentor, Steve Newton, president of Baylor All Saints. He told her, "It's your heart that's going to make you great at this job." She sent in her résumé.

And when she got there, she knew. "As soon as I walked in the front door, I was 100 percent sure of it down to my toenails. It was that paradigm shift when you realize you want this more than anything."

Wilson signed on with Cancer Care Services in July 2010 and hasn't looked back.

"I've learned to be less fearful," she says. "I stopped sleeping when I was first diagnosed with cancer. Very recently, I started sleeping again."

THE DETAILS Cancer Care Services

623 S. Henderson St.,
Fort Worth

This Fort Worth-based nonprofit is locally funded and helps about 3,500 people a year, many of whom receive financial assistance. The agency offers crisis intervention for a year after diagnosis; free social, spiritual and emotional wellness programs; navigators to help low-income patients get free medication; medical equipment and nutritional supplements; COBRA payments; and transportation to appointments. To learn more, call 817-921-0653 or visit www.cancercareservices.org.