

# I've always had chutzpah

Arlene Sandford says she has always had chutzpah (nerve) and now she is using that chutzpah to fight metastatic stomach cancer.

## **Arlene Sanford (66) lives with her husband, Neil, in Rivonia, Gauteng.**

Around mid-2022, Arlene started losing weight as she couldn't eat. "Everything was getting stuck, so I went to our GP and he sent me for an ultrasound. After that I was sent for a colonoscopy (an exam to look for changes in the large intestine and rectum) which was clear, and a gastroscopy (procedure to examine the upper digestive tract), to which the doctor couldn't get the endoscope down and so a biopsy was done," Arlene explains.

"In November 2022, the oncologist told me it's Stage 4 stomach cancer and I burst into tears. She explained that it can't be cured but it can be controlled. From that day, I made the decision to fight this, and I'm going to win," she says.

Cancer isn't something new to Arlene; her father passed away from lung cancer, her mother from leukaemia, and her sister from colon cancer. Her older brother, who lives overseas and speaks to her three times a day, hasn't had cancer.

### **ARLENE'S SUPPORT GROUP**

After Arlene's diagnosis, all her friends kept on messaging her out of concern. However, it became overwhelming for her so Neil decided to form a WhatsApp group, called Arlene's Support Group, where he updates everyone; she is not part of the group. "There's about 50 people on this group from different countries and it takes such a load off me. He updates them good or bad, send images of me and always refers to me as His Beloved," she explains.

### **TREATMENT**

Due to the cancer not being resectable, Arlene was put on a strong dose of chemotherapy and was advised to get a port inserted, which she did. "I'm so happy I got the port, just the other day I watched a lady go through 20 needle pricks to find a vein."

Due to an hospital admission after six cycles, Arlene has now been put on a lower dose of chemotherapy. She adds, "When I started chemo, I told my friends I don't care what it does to me as long as it makes me better. Thankfully, I have never vomited. I have had nausea and a bit of diarrhoea and lost my hair, but it's growing back."

Arlene will be on continuous chemotherapy until her oncologist decides otherwise.

### **OMEN OF SNOW**

"My husband and I were on our way for my scan and it started snowing and I said to him that's an omen. The scan result showed that the tumour had shrunk even more. On the first scan after treatment started, it shrunk by 37%!" Arlene explains.

Arlene admits to being weepy on days but knows this is natural. "Of course, it scares me. Often, I ask why me? But we are fighting. When I hear it has shrunk so much, it makes me want to fight even more. And everyone comments on how positive I am."

### **ONE OF THE TOP SALESPeOPLE**

Arlene has continued working since her diagnosis, however, works from home. Neil installed solar power so when there is load shedding, Arlene can still work. "I have been at the company for 19 years and I'm still one of their top salespeople, even during treatment. My colleagues are so supportive and scold me if I don't rest during the day. They often visit me at my house," she adds.

### **DAY CAREGIVER**

Arlene and Neil decided to get a day caregiver in May this year as Arlene has had a few falls at the house. "We got her because there was a need. She helps me get in the shower, tests my vitals every morning, and helps me nebulise every day. I use a walker to go to the bathroom and need someone with me when I walk."

Arlene continues, "Unfortunately, Neil sleeps in the spare bedroom as I toss and turn and keep him awake at night. If I need him, I will call him. He has been amazing."

The couple also decided to add the Advanced Illness Benefit to their medical aid. This is a comprehensive palliative programme which offers unlimited cover for approved care in the comfort of their own home.

Arlene has since seen a psychologist who visits her every three weeks, as well as a dietitian. "I need to have three oral nutritional supplement drinks a day, which is a meal in a bottle, and drink a lot of water. At times, I don't listen to the dietitian and eat what I want but to me the most



important thing is that I'm eating. I do love full cream ice cream and cheesecake. I can't eat solid foods only semi solid like mince and pasta. Many of my friends cook meals for me. I have such an amazing support system. My GP even messages me to check how I'm doing," she says.

Arlene also has a part-time helper, Sandra, who does all the housework. "She is so special, she has been with us for three years and lives in the complex and is willing to come here at midnight if I need her."

### **RENEWING VOWS**

Before Arlene got diagnosed, the couple wanted to go to the Seychelles to renew their vows to commemorate their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this year. "As soon as I'm able to go, we will go. I want to go to the beach, I want to feel the sand between my toes and I want to grow old together with Neil."✂



### **MEET OUR EDITOR**

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