

A Tribute to Nini Lyman



When diagnosed with cancer, people's reactions are unique and personal. Nancy Stoll Lyman, known as Nini to her family and friends, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in November, 1999 at the age of 39; and she used her experience as a springboard into action and advocacy.

Nini began noticing that something wasn't right with her body in August or September of 1999. Her friends recall her saying that she often felt so full it was as if she'd just eaten an entire Thanksgiving dinner. She was also quite bloated – so much that her husband Tom asked her whether she was pregnant. Over the next three months, she sought the advice of two doctors before making an appointment with a gynecologic oncologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital who was able to officially diagnose her with ovarian cancer. It was there that she received her diagnosis, surgery and chemotherapy treatment.

Getting Involved

Nini did not let her cancer get her down. For eight years after her diagnosis, she helped raise awareness both by talking to other women and by speaking to medical students in the Chicagoland area about ovarian cancer. She helped develop a program called "Lunch and Learn" with the support of the [Chicago Ovarian Cancer Alliance](#) and [Gilda's Club](#). During the lunches, she would describe the signs and symptoms she experienced and also talk about the [ovarian cancer early warning symptoms](#) common to other women. Those symptoms are:

- Bloating
- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
- Urinary symptoms (urgency or frequency)
- Increased abdominal size

Nini was confused by her symptoms and didn't want the same thing to happen to other women, so she talked to medical students with the goal of making sure that they knew that ovarian cancer, once thought to be a "silent killer," was not silent at all and does have symptoms. Armed with this knowledge, she hoped these new doctors would be more likely to recognize the symptoms and send their patients for testing as a first line of defense rather than a last resort once all else had been ruled out.

She was so passionate about education and awareness that she also spent countless hours talking to other women about ovarian cancer, passing out literature and answering any questions they had. She was truly an inspiration.

Family History



One thing that Nini and Tom learned during her fight with ovarian cancer is that women who have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer are at greater risk for getting both types of cancer. Nini's mother had breast cancer, and it wasn't until Nini was diagnosed that she found out her family history, primarily her mother's cancer, may have played a role in her developing ovarian cancer. Some of her sisters may also be at risk, and they are all taking steps to prevent ovarian and breast cancer and to detect it early should they get either one. Some of her sisters are enrolled in the [Northwestern Ovarian Cancer Early Detection and Prevention Program \(NOCEDPP\)](#), doing all they can to stay healthy.

Nini and Tom's three children, Tommy, Bridget and Stephanie, were four, three and 20 months old at the time of Nini's diagnosis. Tom knows that his daughters may have a higher risk of ovarian and breast cancer, so he plans to make sure they know the importance of prevention and screening. During the Lunch and Learn programs, Nini would stress how important it is for women to listen to their bodies, and Tom plans to give that same advice to their daughters.

Research and Support

Nini became involved with [Bears Care](#), the charitable beneficiary of the Chicago Bears Football Club, as a member of the Gala Committee. She joined the Committee prior to her diagnosis in the late 90s, and she was an active member, serving as Co-Chair of the 2003 event. The annual Bears Care Gala now raises funds to support both ovarian and breast cancer research and treatment programs in Chicago. Her courage, grace and spirit continue to inspire her fellow Committee members today as they continue the fight against ovarian and breast cancer. The Galas have raised over eight million dollar to date in support of this cause. [Learn more about Bears Care.](#)

Nini and Tom were also members of Gilda's Club, utilizing their cancer support services after her diagnosis and surgery, while she was undergoing her chemotherapy treatment. Tom is still a member today.

Nini's Spirit Lives On

Nini's memory lives on as do the efforts she helped promote to fight cancer. She is honored by the participation of many supporters who walk in her name each June at the annual [Northwestern Memorial Cancer Survivors' Celebration & Walk](#). Also, a memorial bench has been placed outside the church at Sts. Faith, Hope and Charity in Winnetka, Illinois, and a tree was planted in her memory at Halas Hall - home of Bears Care and the Chicago Bears Football Club. Both serve as daily, visual reminders that the fight against ovarian cancer continues. Bears Care and the Gala Committee remain committed to raising the funds to fight this battle, and Tom continues to speak to medical students, partnering with ovarian cancer survivors during the Lunch and Learn program, making sure that ovarian cancer awareness increases and fewer women have to go through what Nini did.

Learn more about [the symptoms of ovarian cancer](#) and [what you may be able to do to prevent it](#).