

Fredella Prather: Accepting the Gift of Help After a Colon Cancer Diagnosis

Fredella Prather, 59, is a self-described doer, fixer, and control freak. A resident of Georgetown and married to her husband Donnie for 25 years, Fredella is incredibly independent and, as she says, “not great at receiving.”

Fredella was firm that she was not going to participate in regular cancer screenings like getting a mammogram or a colonoscopy. Despite a family history of cancer, she thought “what you don’t know won’t hurt you.”

However, after Fredella’s close friend was diagnosed with lung cancer and Fredella was diagnosed with colorectal cancer months later, she realized how important screenings were and that she needed to be open to receiving the gift of love, support, and help from others as she began her fight against cancer.

Impossible to tell my story without including hers

The impact of cancer is especially poignant for Fredella as she watched her friend Trudy’s journey with lung cancer. “It would be impossible for me to tell my story without including hers,” Fredella says. “Her lung cancer battle would become an inspiration for me.”

Trudy seemingly had won her first fight with lung cancer. So, when a year later her lung cancer returned, Fredella was furious. “I told God how mad I was, and that it just wasn’t right.”

Trudy’s lung cancer journey coincided with the height of COVID, and that left Fredella feeling helpless, not being able to be with her during treatment. “She sent me on silly errands, picking up nail polish and prescriptions, just so I felt like I was being useful,” recalls Fredella. “Trudy was such an independent woman, she needed nothing. She could take care of herself. However, she was

also incredibly selfless – and her gift to me was letting me help her.”

Trudy passed away in August 2020, just months before Fredella embarked on her own cancer journey.

“I had no choice but to give in”

In the fall of 2020, Fredella began having symptoms similar to irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and experienced bleeding when she went to the bathroom. “I just thought it was stress-related,” Fredella said.

She saw her family doctor and he said the only way to know for sure was to schedule a colonoscopy. Fredella told him, “No thank you.” Her doctor set up an appointment with a gastroenterologist, and Fredella cancelled it. “The inconvenience and stigma of a colonoscopy was more than I was ready to deal with,” she says.

However, her symptoms got worse, and as Fredella puts it, “I had no choice but to give in.” She had her first ever colonoscopy at age 57 in March 2021.



Darren Kocs, M.D., medical oncologist at Texas Oncology-Round Rock

“She’s in shock”

Donnie dropped Fredella off for her colonoscopy and sat outside in the parking lot. He couldn’t go in with her because of COVID.

When she was waking up, she overheard the nurse tell the doctor, “We’ve called him, and he’s on the way in.” Fredella was confused. “Donnie came in and looked so pale,” she remembers. The doctor told them he was sorry, it was Stage III colorectal cancer.

“I don’t remember much after that,” says Fredella, “Except that I looked at Donnie and said ‘Trudy.’ I heard Donnie ask the nurse why I was so cold. The nurse told him, ‘She’s not cold – she’s in shock.’”

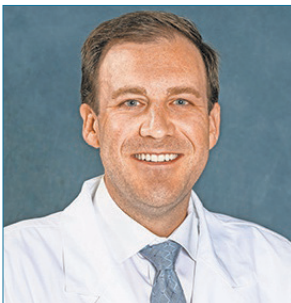
The best team for me

Fredella met with Darren Kocs, M.D., hematologist and medical oncologist at Texas Oncology-Round Rock. “I’ll never forget it! My first meeting with Dr. Kocs was on April Fools’ Day,” she says. “He laid out my treatment plan – and explained why it would work and the data and research that showed why.”

“Ms. Prather was initially diagnosed with colorectal cancer via colonoscopy,” says Dr. Kocs. “Additional imaging suggested a locally advanced but curable disease. It was recommended that she be put on a program of concurrent chemotherapy with radiation to help decrease the tumor size, followed by surgery to remove the tumor and local lymph nodes.”

Fredella wanted to make sure he knew that she didn’t want a “cookie cutter” approach to her treatment. “I wanted him to treat me FOR ME, not based on all of their statistics.”

Andrew H. Miller, M.D., colon and rectal surgeon, Texas Colon & Rectal Specialists-Austin North was added to Fredella’s care team.



Andrew H. Miller, M.D., colon and rectal surgeon at Texas Colon & Rectal Specialists-Austin North

“When Dr. Miller and I met, I was still so scared and emotional, feeling like I had no control over anything,” says Fredella. “When he explained the surgical plan, and that I would have an ileostomy bag for six months, I said no. He reminded me that he was trying to save my life. “He stood his ground on his recommendation, and yet showed such empathy.”

After conferring with Dr. Kocs and knowing that Fredella needed a “win,” it was agreed that she would only have the ileostomy bag for six weeks instead of six months.

“I performed a robotic assisted rectal resection using the most up-to-date robotics technology,” says Dr. Miller. “This provided a quick recovery and return to daily function,” he says.

When the six weeks was up, and reversal surgery was scheduled, Fredella wrote “Bye Bye Baggie” in Sharpie on her bag. “The surgery team got a good laugh, and we all had a victory,” she says.

“God handpicked the best team for me,” Fredella says. “No question.”

The benefits of cancer specialists working together

After surgery, Fredella underwent additional chemotherapy for four months to help reduce her risk of systemic recurrence.

“My nurses at Texas Oncology were heroes,” she says. “They took care of every side effect and adjusted my medications as needed. They would not let me quit before I crossed the finish line.”

She finished her last treatment in January 2022, and her port was removed in February 2022.

And the outlook for Fredella now that treatment is complete? “She has no evidence of any remaining disease,” says Dr. Kocs. “She has an excellent opportunity of long-term control and cure.”

“Mrs. Prather’s situation highlights the important benefits of different cancer specialists working closely together towards a common goal, to achieve the best care and outcomes for patients,” says Dr. Kocs. “It has been an honor to be part of her care team.”

“She maintained such a high level of positivity and trust in her care team throughout treatment,” says Dr. Miller. “She recently joined us at a public demonstration of the robotic surgical technology that was used for her operation and got to try using the equipment herself just like a surgeon. She has been an incredible advocate for listening to the changes in our bodies and getting screened or evaluated.”

The need to give that gift back

Fredella chose to wait until she knew her treatment plan before telling friends and family about her diagnosis.

“I was in such utter shock and wanted to wait until I could wrap my mind around it,” says Fredella. “I felt like the fear of the unknown was worse than the known.”

Fredella knows that if it was not for Trudy, she may not have told people about her cancer and would’ve tried to take this journey alone.

Once the word got out, the

support was overwhelming. “Trudy’s gift to me was letting me help her,” says Fredella. “Now I knew how that felt and I needed to give that gift back to all the people who were reaching out and offering to help me.”

There were some days that Fredella would sob over the kindness of her friends, golfing buddies, and family. “They refused to let me go through it alone,” says Fredella. “Not a day went by that I did not have a text, a phone call, a card, a meal, flowers, cookies.”

All of this could have been prevented

“My story is long and painful with a lot of twists and turns,” says Fredella. “The emotional toll is real.” But these days, her tears are grateful ones. “I was shown the gift of receiving genuine love and support,” she says. Fredella has also changed her tune when it comes to colonoscopies and other important cancer screenings. “I think I’ve had five colonoscopies since my diagnosis. Had I just gotten the one early on, all of this could have been prevented. Get a colonoscopy - it is the best 30 minutes of sleep you will ever get!”



Fredella Prather

“Please do not attempt to go through cancer alone,” Fredella emphasizes. “People want to be there for you. And they will be if you let them.”

In 2024, Texas is estimated to have 12,260 new cases of colorectal cancer and 4,410 expected deaths. For more information, visit TexasOncology.com

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