

Surviving Cancer

Against impossible odds, Kent and Naida Bamford beat the disease. Here's how they did it.

Story & photo by **Eric Grant**

In the evening, when thunderheads rise in the west and rain cascades across their wheatfields, Kent and Naida Bamford count their blessings.

They now realize life isn't a means to an end. It's a journey with myriad blessings, with all its rich experiences and sensations — the songs of birds, the comfort of friendship and family, and the peace of late evening on the High Plains.

The Bamfords found out the hard way that pancreatic cancer, with its 4% survival rate, brings about clarity and purpose. When Naida was diagnosed with it in January 2005, everything in their lives was rocked to its core.

Their business priorities changed. They questioned where they'd been and where they wanted to be, and they suddenly realized how much they'd taken for granted.

"When something like this comes along, you realize how lucky you are," Kent says.

The Bamfords are not alone. Each year cancer afflicts about 5% of the U.S. population. About 41% of all men and women — roughly one in two — will be diagnosed with some form of cancer, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But if it's you that's been diagnosed with the disease, it's 100%.

Survival rates continue to climb each year, and about 65% of all people diagnosed with cancer survive it. While that helps bolster hope, being diagnosed with cancer is a terrible position in which to be placed.

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Road to recovery

The Bamfords, who are 37-year veterans in the cattle-feeding business, spent the better part of 2005 flying back and forth from Denver, Colo., to Houston, Texas, where Naida was receiving treatment. Their family, employees, friends and neighbors picked up much of the slack back home, helping with the day-to-day operations at their Haxtun, Colo., feedlot.

She received the maximum radiation therapy and chemotherapy, and underwent surgery to remove the tumor. Two days later, Hurricane Rita struck the city. The hospital had to be abandoned by all but patients, nurses and doctors, and Kent was literally left

in the dark, with no idea how she was doing.

But when the clouds cleared, the doctors returned with the prognosis. Miraculously, Naida had beaten the odds, and the doctors were reasonably certain that she would be well on her way to a full recovery.

By spring 2006, life slowly returned to normal at the Bamford's home on the eastern Colorado plains.

"We've had a miracle at our house," Kent says. "The cancer is gone."

Keys to survival

Both Kent and Naida believe there were six key reasons she survived the disease.

"One of the things I want to do with my

life now," she says, "is to help others who are facing cancer realize that there is hope, that they can beat the odds no matter how great they may be."

First, Naida says, never underestimate the power of friends and family. "Cancer makes you realize the importance of your relationships with friends and family," she says. "One of the things that was the most humbling to me was the support of all of our friends who called or sent flowers. There was not a time when we didn't have fresh flowers at the house or at the hospital."

Second, stay busy. "It helped me to get through the treatments to have something else to concentrate on," says Naida, who does the accounting for the feedlot. "You need to be busy with your business, to have something mentally to focus on. You never realize how valuable your work is to your mental well-being. It gives you focus and purpose for why you're still here."

Next, find others who've survived the disease. "When we were first diagnosed, we looked at the states for survival for pancreatic cancer," Naida recalls. "It didn't look good. Basically, it said curl up and get ready to die. Then we got on the Anderson web site (www.mdanderson.org/diseases/pancreas/), and there were portraits of survivors. We found two cases of people who were similar to ours. I read their memoirs, and I said I don't need to read anymore. Somebody else beat this, so can I."

Fourth, keep a positive attitude. "Kent was never negative with me. He never shared his fears that I might not make it," Naida says.

Fifth, keep the faith. "We knew the mountain we were climbing was going to be steep, but we weren't going to give up. We knew we had to do it together," Naida says. "It was extremely important for me that I didn't ever lose my faith in God. I kept index cards of Bible verses next to the bed that a friend gave me. And, believe me, prayer works."

Sixth, stay strong; you can win this. "Naida is very strong, amazingly strong," Kent says. "I constantly questioned why it happened to her and not to me. She never questioned it. My father died of cancer 12 years ago, and at the beginning he told me to always tell him the truth. So Naida and I always operated in the same way. We never sugarcoated anything."

"Cancer will turn your life upside down," Naida adds. "You just don't know. But we both realized this wasn't going to be something we were going to panic about. We promised to always keep cool, and to always love each other through this ordeal."



Eight steps to defeating cancer

STEP 1: Talk openly with the doctor who tells you your diagnosis. Don't hesitate to ask all the questions that are on your mind, whether that physician is your family doctor, an oncologist (cancer expert) or some other type of specialist. The doctor should answer your questions clearly, help you understand your medical condition, and advise you on what to do next.

STEP 2: Get a second opinion. New developments in cancer treatment are happening so fast that it is practically impossible for every doctor to be aware of all the most up-to-date ways to deal with the disease. And when you get a second opinion, the doctor giving it should automatically re-evaluate your diagnosis to make sure that it is accurate.

STEP 3: Inform yourself about your cancer. Educate yourself about your particular cancer and how to cope with it. By becoming a better-informed cancer patient, you may find it easier to discuss your condition and to participate in the choice of a treatment plan.

STEP 4: Decide carefully on your treatment plan. Once you have gotten a second opinion and gathered information on your own, you are ready to take the most important step — deciding on the specifics of your treatment plan, including what it should be, where it should be provided and who should administer it.

STEP 5: Be smart. During your medical treatment, you can take many positive steps to help it along. You need to stay informed about what is taking place and how your recovery is progressing. You need to stay strong and fit, both physically and psychologically.

STEP 6: Make the most of available support services. While you are undergoing treatment, you may find that you need a helping hand to keep your life functioning smoothly day to day. Some people can call on a network of family and friends for help. But if you can't, check with your physician or nurse for referrals to such services and see the "Resource Directory" in the *Cancer Research Institute (CRI) Helpbook: What to do if Cancer Strikes?* available online at www.cancerresearch.org/hbintro1.html for a listing of helping organizations along with their addresses and telephone numbers.

STEP 7: Consider your finances. As part of dealing with your cancer, you must think through how you will pay for your care. Diagnosis and treatment are expensive. So are rehabilitation and some support services. What's more, you may not be able to work full time during this period in your life. Even people who have health insurance need to do some financial planning at this time. But no one should ever automatically assume that first-rate care is not available just because money is a problem. Ironing out financial concerns early on can lift a great burden of worry from your shoulders, freeing you to focus your energy on the most important issue — getting well.

STEP 8: Take charge of your future. Cancer is one of the more curable chronic illnesses. You don't have to feel that the future is gloomy or out of your control. Take command of your future by paying attention to your own health and well-being, making sure you see your doctor for follow-up care, and looking ahead with hope and zest for living.

— Courtesy of the Cancer Research Institute