

# Taking Care of My **WIFE** as She Fought **MESOTHELIOMA** CAMERON RECOUNTS THE JOURNEY

Video: [www.mesothelioma.com/heather](http://www.mesothelioma.com/heather)

Mesothelioma is an aggressive type of cancer. It turned Cameron Von St. James' life upside down, when his wife Heather was diagnosed. They had just become parents of a newborn, so Cameron would have to take on the additional roles of caregiver for his wife and sole breadwinner for his family, all the while caring for their infant daughter. It was a trying time, to say the least, but friends—and strangers—supported them through those years. Today, Heather is cancer-free. Cameron recounts the journey.

Author  
**Cameron Von St. James**

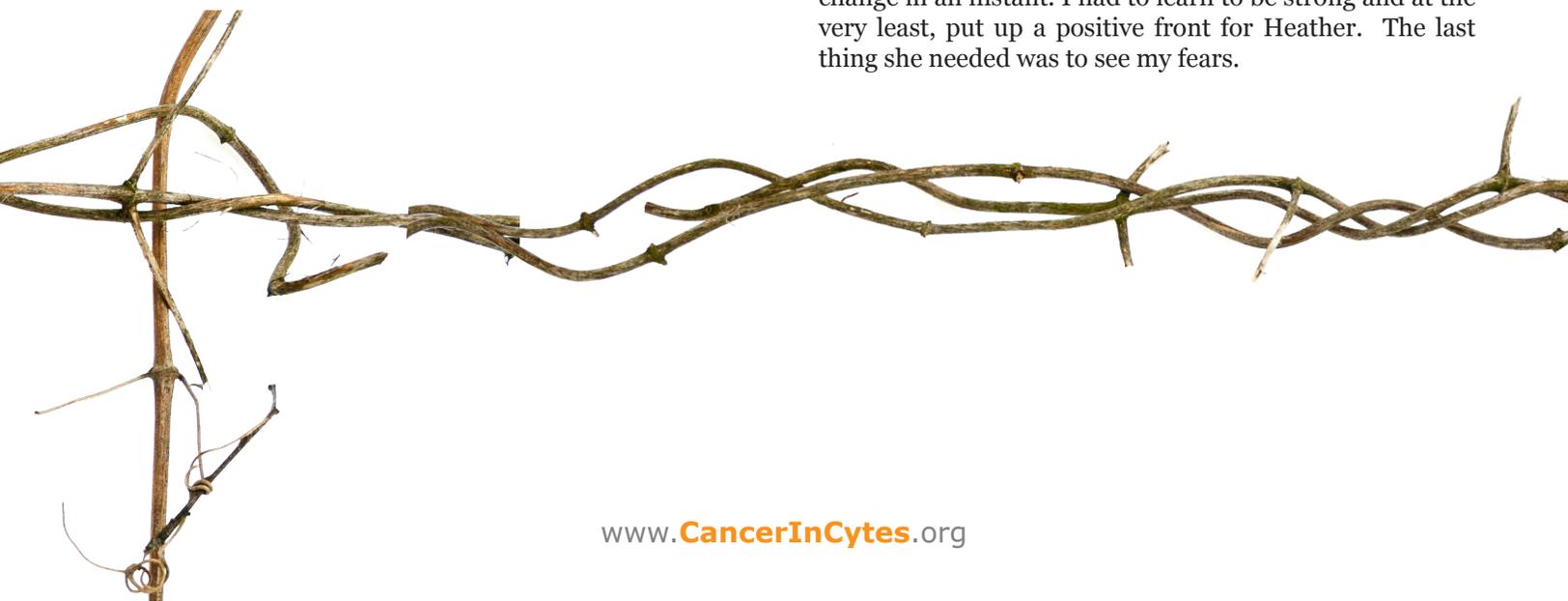
Graphic Artist  
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**My** wife Heather and I will always remember November 21, 2005. That was the day doctors diagnosed her with malignant pleural mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer. That same day I went from being my wife's husband to being her caregiver as well. I was nowhere near ready for this challenge. Just three months before my wife was diagnosed, she gave birth to our daughter and only child, Lily. Our joy and excitement over being new parents was quickly replaced by fear and chaos as Heather began a fight for her life.

I was plunged into my role as caregiver even before my wife and I left the doctor's office following her diagnosis. First, the doctor gave us a bit of information on mesothelioma. Next, he said that we should go to a specialist to learn about possibilities for treatment. There were three choices: A hospital run by the local university, a great regional hospital that didn't have a major mesothelioma program and a respected mesothelioma specialist in Boston named Dr. David Sugarbaker. I waited for my wife to announce what she wanted to do or ask for more information. Instead, she looked totally overwhelmed and said nothing. She looked to me and her eyes pleaded for help. I turned to the doctor and told him, "Get us to Boston!"

*If I had one piece of advice to give to other cancer patients and their caregivers, it would be to accept every offer of help you receive. No matter how big or small the support may be, it will take a load off your shoulders, and it will help you feel less alone. Other people do care about you, and those are the people you can depend on when you need help.*

In the next two months, our formerly organized lives became chaotic. My wife and I had both worked full time before she was diagnosed, but this was impossible now. Heather couldn't work at all, and I changed to part time. I was too busy handling other issues, such as scheduling travel arrangements back and forth to Boston, going to doctor's appointments and caring for our daughter. The load of new responsibilities was heavy, to say the least. Fearing that my wife was going to lose her battle with cancer after we lost all our savings and everything we owned, I became overwhelmed on a number of occasions and began sobbing on the kitchen floor. I wished everything could just change in an instant. I had to learn to be strong and at the very least, put up a positive front for Heather. The last thing she needed was to see my fears.





Friends, family and even strangers helped Heather and me in so many ways. People offered us everything from kind words to much needed financial help. We will never be able to fully express our gratitude for this support. If I had one piece of advice to give to other cancer patients and their caregivers, it would be to accept every offer of help you receive. No matter how big or small the support may be, it will take a load off your shoulders, and it will help you feel less alone. Other people do care about you, and those are the people you can depend on when you need help.

Caring for somebody with a cancer diagnosis is hard, and there's no way to escape that. So much disorder and stress will ensue that this period may challenge you more than anything else you've ever experienced. Unlike a job or school, you can't quit this test. You have to manage your emotions carefully, controlling destructive feelings like anger and fear. You'll have to accept that not all days will be good ones, and you'll have to forgive yourself. No matter what, though, you have to keep hope alive. Throughout this time, take advantage of every resource to stay sane and effective as a caregiver.

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After Heather went through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation for mesothelioma, she finally pulled through and beat the cancer, despite the overwhelming odds against her. Now, seven years after she was diagnosed with mesothelioma, she remains cancer-free.

This entire experience showed me how I can use my stubborn nature as a strength, which was crucial at times. Most of all, however, it showed me that time is a precious thing. Just two years after Heather was diagnosed, while working full time and caring for Heather and Lily, I decided to return to school and get a degree in information technology.

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Figuring out how to handle heavy stress and use my time effectively while caring for my wife during her fight with cancer got me ready to succeed in school. After graduating as an honor student, I was chosen to speak to my class at graduation. My graduation speech is still vivid in my mind. I told my classmates that if they had asked me five years ago, when I was caring for my wife, what I'd be doing now, I never would have thought that I'd be graduating with honors and giving a speech to my class, with my healthy wife and daughter in the audience to cheer me on. I told them to always keep hope alive no matter what, and that every one of them can do more than they might ever imagine as long as they keep believing in themselves.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Cameron Von St. James is husband to mesothelioma survivor Heather Von St. James. Both Cameron and Heather now work with the Mesothelioma Cancer Alliance to help support mesothelioma victims and their families, as well as raise awareness for mesothelioma and the dangers of asbestos exposure. Cameron, Heather, and seven-year-old Lily live in Roseville, MN, where Cameron works as a systems analyst for U.S. Bank.



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