

# “I got my life back.”

**First  
Person**

*Virginia  
Garner  
battled  
leukemia  
with the  
help of  
family,  
friends,  
students and  
a UCLA  
clinical trial.*

**P** By Virginia Garner

HONE CALL, AUGUST 6, 1997:

*My doctor:* “Virginia, your blood tests came back with a few irregularities.”

*Me:* “Oh, really? What?”

*My doctor:* “We believe you have chronic myelogenous leukemia.”

To me the word leukemia meant “death.” How could I, a health-conscious, 53-year-old woman, have this disease? Was it my fault?

I was caught in a medical tornado. Nine painful bone marrow biopsies led to debilitating immunotherapy treatment, two daily self-administered injections of a chemotherapeutic drug, and a new concept: physical limitations.

I had to stop to rest in the middle of blow drying my hair. Severe mouth sores prevented me from talking and required my dedicated husband to make me dinner in a blender so I could sip it through a straw. I was so anemic I couldn’t walk 10 feet without resting.

Yet, except for two weeks spent at home battling pneumonia induced by a depleted immune system, I worked daily, teaching English to the 150+ teenagers at the high school I love in Diamond Bar, Calif.

By the end of the year I wasn’t sure I could continue dealing with the physical adversities I faced every day.

Then, miraculously, on April 19, 1999, I got my life back from a physician/scientist at UCLA’s Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. He is Dr. Charles Sawyers, and he is my hero.

Dr. Sawyers headed UCLA’s arm of a clinical trial for a new drug called STI-571 (commercial name: Gleevec). It’s a “target drug” that directly attacks the genetic mutation causing my leukemia.

I remember sitting in an examination room with Dr. Sawyers, my husband and my sister-in-law after my first dose of STI-571. We all waited, wondering what would happen next. What happened was momentous. Within two weeks, my disease was under control and my health began returning.

Now I’m healthy enough to have walked the 2001 Los Angeles Marathon in honor of other leukemia survivors and in memory of those who valiantly fought this formidable foe and lost, some of whom were very special to me and my friends.

My journey back to health has been filled with exhilaration and gratitude. My husband, Van, is my devoted caretaker, researcher, and cheerleader; my sister-in-law, Connie, drives me to UCLA every time I need a bone marrow test; my nephews, Stephen and Craig, support me 100%; my best friend, Judy, literally held me up when I couldn’t stand by myself, and my incredible students support me with love.

How lucky I am! ☆

