‘I Love What I Do’: While She Helps Patients, a Nurse Grapples with Her Own Ovarian Cancer

Toni Moses, RN, says she’s grateful to be enrolled in a clinical trial led by Bradley Corr, MD, of the CU Cancer Center.

September 12, 2025 By University of Colorado Cancer Center

For Toni Moses, RN, a UCHealth emergency department nurse in Greeley, taking care of patients has been a profession and a passion for 34 years. She learned she had stage IV ovarian cancer in 2019, yet she has remained dedicated to her patients, staying on the job through successive rounds of chemotherapy, radiation, and other therapies.

Moses, 62, said she has never seriously considered stepping away from nursing after her diagnosis. “It’s been my career. I love what I do. I just thought, ‘This is different for me, so I have to find a different way to do it and keep myself safe.’”

Her experience as both a practitioner and a patient “helps me understand what patients are going through,” she says. “I see them from a different viewpoint. When people are sick, it may not be critical, it may not even be an emergency. But to them, it’s their emergency.”

And last year, when the chance arose for Moses to take part in a clinical trial in hopes it could add years to her life, Moses didn’t hesitate. That had a lot to do with her confidence in her University of Colorado Cancer Center oncologist, Bradley Corr, MD, who is leading the trial.

“I have a lot of trust and faith in Dr. Corr,” she says. “I had full confidence in trying this, and was just full speed ahead, let’s give it a whirl and see what it does. I knew if it didn’t work, we’d find another option, but the chances were that it would work. And it has.”

An ideal person and patient

Corr is associate professor in the CU Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology’s Division of Gynecologic Oncology, where he’s director of clinical research, and is the inaugural holder of the Katie Taylor Memorial Endowed Chair in Gynecologic Oncology.

Corr, who has treated Moses for six years, calls her “an ideal person and patient. She’s a nurse who works in the health system, so she’s very knowledgeable and understands quite a lot, but doesn’t overstep her knowledge. She’s very appreciative of all the expertise that we can provide her. She’s also on top of her own medical care – she’s timely, willing to listen, and wants to do the best things possible for her.”

He notes that Moses “always brings her husband with her to our visits, because she knows that sometimes these are hard conversations, and it’s always best to have another set of ears available. She wants what’s best for her, and she can tell me honestly when things are going well or not going well. We have a great relationship and it’s a pleasure to be a part of her care team.”

‘A really scary time’

When she was in college, Moses had trouble deciding what she wanted to be until her mother introduced her to a nursing instructor, which led to her earning a bachelor’s degree in nursing and a master’s in organizational leadership and management. “I’ve done a lot of different kinds of nursing – flight nursing, ICU nursing, emergency nursing, and I was a director of trauma services at one point,” she says.

Currently, Moses is a charge nurse at the free-standing West Greeley Emergency Department operated by UCHealth, a CU Cancer Center clinical partner. She met her husband, Kim, 33 years ago, and they have a 26-year-old son, Ryan.

She says that until her cancer diagnosis, she’d been healthy her whole life, and she had no family history of cancer.

In 2019, “I felt a hard lump in my left groin,” she says. “There was no pain, but I got it checked, and it came positive.” Moses was referred to Corr, who diagnosed her with stage IV-B high grade serous ovarian cancer.

“That was a really scary time,” Moses says.

‘It just kept me going’

While ovarian cancer ranks only 14th among cancer diagnoses for women in the United States, it ranks sixth for cancer deaths, according to American Cancer Society statistics. That’s partly because it often goes undetected until the cancer has spread beyond the ovaries. The ACS projects 20,890 new ovarian cancer diagnoses in the U.S. this year and 12,730 deaths.

High-grade serous ovarian cancer, which starts in the fallopian tubes and ovaries, is the most common type of ovarian cancer. A stage IV-B ovarian cancer has spread (metastasized) to other parts of the body. “In general, that’s a very poor prognosis,” Corr says.

In October 2019, debulking surgery was performed to remove as much cancerous tissue as possible, followed by adjuvant chemotherapy to destroy remaining cancer cells. Moses “had a great response and went on a maintenance PARP inhibitor, which is the standard of care,” Corr says. A PARP inhibitor blocks a protein that helps cancer cells repair their damaged DNA, leading to cell death.

Continuing to work, Moses says, “brought normalcy and motivation to me. It just kept me going. There’ve been a few tears, but mostly I try to stay positive and just make the best of things. There are people far worse off than me.”

Moses says her colleagues and managers helped to protect her by handling high-risk patients who could be infectious and by adjusting her shift. “I’ve had quite a few episodes of low immunity, and I did contract the flu this year. But other than that, I’ve been fortunate in not getting sick.”

Working through COVID-19

In March 2020, while Moses was working in the emergency department of UCHealth Greeley Hospital, she finished her first round of chemotherapy just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Despite being at high risk from the virus, she says, “I worked through all of that, and just tried to power through all the chemo and the radiation as much as I could.”

She said she and her colleagues “felt an obligation to keep going to work, despite the risk, because people needed us. I worked with a few nurses who were pregnant at the time, and we didn’t know how that was going to impact them. We were trying hard for everybody.”

In December 2020, because of her job and her medical condition, Moses became the first person in Weld County to receive the newly authorized COVID-19 vaccine, followed by dozens of her co-workers.

Asked about the vaccine by a Greeley Tribune reporter, Moses said how exciting it was “that we’ve come this far so fast. We’re making history, and to think that we lived through a pandemic and there’s hope and a future coming for all of us to get back to normal life, that we can eradicate this.”

Praised by the governor

In November 2020, Moses’ cancer recurred. “She underwent a vaccine trial that we were performing here, and had some radiation to help control a local site of disease recurrence,” Corr says. “And then, unfortunately, she recurred again in 2021, underwent chemotherapy again, and went on another maintenance therapy. She was on that for quite some time, and then she underwent a recurrence in 2023 and went on another round of chemotherapy.”

Through it all, Moses stayed on the job. With each round of chemo, she learned to predict how many days she would be out sick and how soon she could return to work. “I was able to adjust my schedule around what days I would be out of commission.”

In February 2021, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis invited Moses to the state Capitol to attend his State of the State address to the legislature, in which he paid tribute to “our brave health care workers who put their own lives on hold and have made so many sacrifices to save so many souls” during the pandemic.

Polis said Moses “continued to show up for her patients while she herself was undergoing chemotherapy for stage IV cancer.” He said she was “somebody who went in every day, while facing probably the hardest time in her own life, but never letting that stop her from doing the needed work.”

Says Moses: “I’ve never been through anything like that before. I got to go into the governor’s office and sit and talk with him and his staff. I felt very honored to be there and represent our UCHealth people.”

Enrolling in UPROAR

In June 2024, Moses enrolled in a phase II clinical trial designed and led by Corr that is continuing to recruit participants at UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital and several other sites across the country. The trial is aimed at treating certain cases of ovarian cancer, such as Moses’ cancer, that have recurred after initially responding to platinum-based chemotherapy.

Says Corr: “We call it UPROAR. It’s an investigator-initiated trial of a PARP inhibitor called olaparib with an antibody-drug conjugate called mirvetuximab, which works by targeting tumor cells that express the folate receptor alpha protein, and her tumors do express that.”

Corr says Moses “has been doing well on the trial. We know her cancer will come back, but we’re trying not only to extend the timeframe of when it comes back with a tolerable therapy, but also, hopefully, to extend her life as well. She’s now coming up on six years since the diagnosis.”

Moses says her treatment in the UPROAR trial “is probably the most tolerable of any I’ve been on. I get a bit nauseated now and then, and it can cause fatigue. But overall, if that’s all you have to deal with, that’s a piece of cake.”

Her husband makes her breakfast, lunch, and dinner most days. “I get a lot of good support,” she says with a smile.

Thankful and grateful

Today, Moses says she is “thankful and grateful every day for how well I’m doing. There’ve been a

few hiccups along the way, but I keep moving forward. I've worked full time through every treatment I've been through. I can do normal activities and go places, although I don't have the stamina I used to. I'm doing what I enjoy and I'm grateful I can do it."

She adds: "I'm grateful I got connected to Dr. Corr. I give him all the credit for my longevity and my life, and it's been a productive life since I was diagnosed."

Moses says that the quality of care she has received from the CU Cancer Center and her UCHealth colleagues has made her "really appreciate and be so proud of where I work. It's every aspect of care, from Dr. Corr and his team, to the nutrition people, to the research coordinators and the pharmacists. I get phone calls – 'How are you doing? How's that new med working? Do you have any questions?' The follow up, the consistency, and the thoroughness make me so grateful. I want everyone to feel that way when they're a patient here."

Asked what advice she would give to someone who receives a cancer diagnosis, Moses says: "Everyone thinks you're going to die tomorrow. And that's natural. But in the medical field, we're trying to treat it more as a long-term illness rather than a fatal diagnosis. I would tell people to focus on that fact and trust your caregivers."

Moses says her husband has brought up the topic of retirement. "I know that's coming soon. But I'm not there yet. I still want to keep doing what I'm doing."

This story was published by the University of Colorado Cancer Center on September 3, 2025. It is republished with permission.
