

He Survived Lung Cancer With Help From Hugh Hefner and a Co-star of “Kendra on Top”

A Lung Cancer Diary with Hank Baskett, 79, who lives with his wife, Judy, in Clovis, New Mexico. He was diagnosed with Stage IV ALK+ non-small-cell lung cancer in 2011.

September 11, 2023 As told to [Bob Barnett](#)

I grew up in South Carolina, with eight brothers and sisters. You could say we were poor, but we didn't know it because of the love we shared. I joined the Air Force in 1961, out of high school, and served in Vietnam from 1967 to '68 and again from 1969 to '70. We would sit outside and watch the planes spray that black and red fog from Agent Orange, which is now identified by the federal government as a presumptive cause of lung cancer.

I started medical treatment for respiratory problems in the '70s—they were written off as allergies, bronchitis, flu. X-rays didn't show any cancer, although I didn't have MRIs or CT scans until 2011.

I retired as a chief master sergeant in 1991, got my college degree in sociology and in 1994 became executive director of the Oasis Children's Advocacy Center, which investigates child abuse. I retired again in January 2016. I have two daughters from my first marriage, and Judy and I got married in 1980. We have two sons.

April 2011

My friend Bill—he was in one of my troops; we served together in Egypt and at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico—was going to the nearest Veteran's Affairs Medical Center in Amarillo, so I said I'd go with him. While I was there, I decided to go to the emergency room about my persistent hacking cough. An X-ray showed something on my lungs, so they ordered a CT scan. The doctor came back and said, "It's cancer, and it's bad." He said a nurse would be calling me about treatment.

I thought, This is like a death sentence—how am I gonna go home and tell Judy? I took a walk alone. I said to myself, "I'm going to try and not worry about this." I gave it to my Heavenly Father. I just asked Him to take it and guide me through it. When Judy came home, she looked at me and said, "What's wrong?" She just knew from my face. I told her it was cancer and it was bad. Everything changed. I also spoke with our youngest son, Hank III, that night. The next day, I called

my other son and daughters, my sisters and brothers and then Judy's family.

Hank III was an NFL wide receiver and costar with his wife, Kendra, on the TV show Kendra on Top. She was a former Playboy Bunny, and they were both close to Hugh Hefner. That Sunday, they took our 18-month-old grandson, Hank IV, to the annual Easter egg hunt at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles, and when they told Hef about me, he asked his assistant, Mary, to set up appointments for me to see his doctors. So a few days later, I flew to LA and saw a primary care doctor, an oncologist, a pulmonologist and a cardiologist. They did a biopsy. I flew back home, and a couple of days later, the oncologist called me and told me I had Stage IV non-small-cell lung cancer. He wanted to start chemotherapy right away. I'm thinking, Stage IV, that's the last stage out.

May 2011

Approximately two weeks later, I started chemotherapy treatment at Cedars-Sinai hospital in LA. I flew out there every three weeks for a year. I learned a long time ago that you can only control what you can control. In the meantime, you just got to live, to enjoy all the beautiful things in the world.

November 2011

The chemo wasn't working, so they started me on a different chemo regimen.

May 2012

I had my last chemo injection. It wasn't working. I had lost my hair and had swelling in my legs, although I still played golf. They told me there was nothing else they could do. But the Heavenly Father had already set things in motion for me.

Because of me, my son Hank sponsored a golf tournament to benefit the Bonnie J. Addario Lung Cancer Foundation, [which merged with the Lung Cancer Alliance in 2019 to become the GO2 for Lung Cancer foundation]. I went. Bonnie was there. I'm a hugger, and so is she. She looked at me and told me my pallor wasn't good, maybe I wasn't getting the right treatment. She set me up with D. Ross Camidge, MD, PhD, at the University of Colorado Cancer Center in Aurora. I will never forget how [Bonnie] made me feel. Somebody cares.

June–December 2012

I started on a different chemotherapy combination. But they also did new tests. At Cedars-Sinai, I had been tested to see if my cancer had an ALK [anaplastic lymphoma kinase] mutation. That test showed only 13% of the cells in a tumor biopsy were positive for ALK, but the threshold for treatment was 15%. Dr. Camidge thought it was pretty close, so he retested me and found it was 16% or 17%. So I was now a candidate for a targeted therapy for ALK-positive lung cancer.

January 2013

I started taking a targeted therapy. After a few years, I developed resistance, so I was switched to an experimental ALK inhibitor. It's a pill I still take every day. I'm so thankful for my doctor, the nurses, the people who parked my car at the hospital. They're all part of my therapy.

March 2014

My son Hank became an official spokesperson for the Bonnie J. Addario Lung Cancer Foundation, and together, we did a public service announcement for TV to raise awareness about lung cancer. It was called "The Big Hug."

January 2016

I retired from the child abuse center. I did fundraisers for this too. These children are so precious.

2014-2020

I continued to work with the GO2 for Lung Cancer foundation, giving speeches at cancer walks, fundraisers and events. A Hank Baskett Sr. Spirit Award has been given at each golf tournament. We've participated in events in Philadelphia, Phoenix, DC, San Francisco. They even put me on a billboard in the Denver area. If it's gonna help someone, I'm gonna do it. COVID shut down the awards program, but if it starts up again, I'll get involved again!

July 2020

An MRI revealed a tumor in my brain, a first. I joked with the doctor. I said, "I can't have a tumor on the brain because my momma always told me I didn't have a brain." You got to keep your sense of humor.

August 2020

I received five bouts of radiation treatment to the brain over five days. On my next visit, they told me that everything was looking good.

March 2022

I was prescribed a second pill, another targeted therapy that works against a different mutation.

April-May 2023

An MRI revealed a new tumor on the brain. A radiologist located two tumors instead of one. I received radiation treatments for both tumors.

August 2023

People with cancer call me all the time, from all over the world, and I tell them, "Don't claim the cancer." I don't have cancer. I was diagnosed with cancer, but that's not me. Don't let cancer control you. You control the cancer. Surround yourself with people who say, "We're gonna beat it." Look at yourself in the mirror every day, and say, "Hey, good lookin', we're gonna have a great day."