

Sustained Through Cancer by Strong Faith, Family and Medical Advances

Minnesotan Barb Skurdahl was on vacation to see a life-size Noah's Ark when she unexpectedly learned that she was living with chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

June 9, 2025 By [Trent Straube](#)

A trip to the ER is not on anyone's vacation itinerary. But Barb Skurdahl, 75, of north central Minnesota, was forced to take such a detour during a trip to Kentucky, where she and her husband wanted to explore Ark Encounter, the Bible history theme park featuring a life-size Noah's Ark. Unexplained pains in Barb's arm led to a stop at urgent care. The cause turned out to be pleurisy, an inflammation of the lung. But during the exam a "very astute ER doctor ordered several vials of blood be taken," Barb recalls. "The tests revealed that my white blood count was at 282,000, and a normal range is between 4,000 and 11,000. Yikes! He announced that I had chronic lymphocytic leukemia [CLL]."

That was in 2021. Today, Barb is a retired flight attendant and executive assistant who works part-time as a bank teller and enjoys life with her husband in Crosslake, a recreational resort community. She keeps her CLL in check with daily pills—a BTK inhibitor, which blocks a protein called Bruton tyrosine kinase that is known to promote cancer growth—and regular checkups with her care team. "Keep those appointments," Barb advises. "Fortunately, over the course of this strenuous journey, I have been asymptomatic," she adds. "I learned that my paternal grandmother also had CLL, living to her late 80s. Even though there is no cure for CLL, the good news is that it can be managed. I won't die from it—praise God!"

Barb Skurdahl

Courtesy of Barb Skurdahl

Cancer Health interviewed Barb for the latest installment of our Can Heal column—the empowering phrase “Can Heal” is right there in our title. She shares more of her experiences and insights.

First off, did you and your husband get to visit the Ark replica before your vacation was cut short?

Yes, we visited the Ark before I became ill. It's the story of Noah's obedience and faith in God's plan for humanity. Noah did not panic in extreme circumstances and instead focused upon the faithfulness of God's care, which is similar to what I am doing each day.

How did you initially react to your diagnosis?

It was, of course, shocking and potentially life-shattering. Say it ain't so, doc! The "C word"! Surely, not me! How can this be true without any symptoms? During the long and somber drive home, believe it or not, my soul had a sense of calm, which surprised me. And yes, I believe the source of it was the Holy Spirit. The more I thought about this situation, the more determined I became to confront it rationally instead of emotionally. What good would it do to fill my eyes with tears and be a drama queen? I knew the Lord would guide me if I was willing to follow His lead. This was surely a sudden turn of events in my life plan. Time to reassess my priorities.

What was your plan once you returned home? Many people with CLL remain in a "watch and wait" period until they need to start treatment.

I consulted with a physician, who confirmed the CLL diagnosis. Knowing that it was treatable helped lessen my anxiety. I was assigned a long-distance oncologist near Buffalo, New York, because our clinic didn't have one on staff. We had Zoom meetings and phone calls to determine when the medication should begin. His manner of speaking was always reassuring and was grounded in the latest cancer research facts. Looking back, I am so thankful that I did not delay getting to the right doctor. For the past two years, I have seen a local oncologist. I use a cancer medication [two pills daily], and my blood counts have fallen to normal levels. The benefits of continual checkups to my peace of mind and my body have proven to be worth every bit of effort.

Aside from medical treatment, what has helped you heal on this journey?

I have other health issues, such as skin cancer and arthritis, but I feel good enough to work and thrive here in God's country. On calm, sunny days, my husband and I launch our pontoon boat into a chain of lakes to enjoy nature. I read daily, especially biographies, and at the top of my booklist are best sellers like *The Coming Golden Age* by Dr. David Jeremiah. My spirit has been empowered with hopeful truths that teach me the best way to live now and in the life to come. To this day, I still enjoy cooking meals while overlooking a lake with inspiring views, socializing with friendly

neighbors, watching gorgeous sunsets and serving customers at a local bank. I'm so blessed to have the emotional support of my family, dear friends, coworkers, experienced medical team and, most of all, Jesus, the great physician. They are all readily accessible if I need their support, comfort, a listening ear and unconditional love. My strong Christian faith has sustained me through this ordeal.

What advice would you leave for anyone facing a cancer diagnosis?

To be honest, there have been days when negative self-talk about the future has tried to invade my positive outlook. When it arrives and threatens to take me down, I deliberately redirect it to the trash bin and replace it with researched information that gives me the energy and drive to continue leading a normal life. I am also thankful for the opportunity to share my experience with others, and I encourage cancer patients to stay productive and explore all options for treatment. Without a doubt, we live in a time of extraordinary medical advances that are giving fresh hope to many.

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