

Fighting Metastatic Melanoma: Brie Garrison's Story

Together, Brie and her loved ones agree that they won't ever take "no" for an answer.

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South Carolina mom-of-two Briane Garrison was working as an oncology nurse in the summer of 2022 when she happened to come down with COVID. She was looking forward to returning to work, but persistent high fevers and trouble breathing instead brought her to the emergency room. Both she and her doctor assumed she was experiencing "long-COVID" – health problems continuing or developing after an initial period of COVID infection – but her symptoms were serious enough to warrant a CT scan of her chest.

While being driven home by her mom, Brie received a call from the hospital urging her to return immediately: they found an unknown mass in her left lung. She accessed her online results while on the way and felt immediate concern. Upon returning to the hospital, Brie underwent a biopsy of the mass and within a few days it was confirmed as melanoma.

"My knowledge of what the lungs should look like told me all I needed to know when I first saw the scan results," remembered Brie. "But I was never expecting melanoma specifically."

Discovery of Primary Melanoma: Blue Nevus

Brie did not regularly see a dermatologist. In fact, about ten years prior to her shocking melanoma diagnosis was the last time she'd had a skin check. At that appointment, Brie's dermatologist pointed out a blue nevus – pigmented skin lesion characterized by the presence of blue or blue-black spots on the skin– located on her lower back. Aside from noting the lesion, no further action was taken by her dermatologist and Brie largely forgot about it as it was not regularly visible to her.

Following the news of the melanoma in her lung, Brie was seen by a dermatologist for a [full body skin exam](#). Her doctor showed immediate concern and decided to excise and biopsy the blue nevus. As the excision went on, the true depth of the lesion was revealed. Her doctor described it as an "iceberg", invading deep into Brie's skin. The biopsy soon confirmed her doctor's suspicions and Brie received yet another melanoma diagnosis.

Melanoma Progression and Considering a Clinical Trial

Soon after, Brie met with her oncologist who suggested she begin treatment with combination checkpoint immunotherapy nivolumab + relatlimab ([Opdualag](#)). After only four cycles, scans revealed that Brie's lung mass was growing and that additional metastases had formed in her right lung and adrenal gland. She switched to combination checkpoint immunotherapy [ipilimumab \(Yervoy\)](#) + [nivolumab \(Opdivo\)](#) in the hopes that it would be more effective, but after nearly a year of treatment, scans still showed disease progression.

"My doctor did not know what else to offer me at the time, so we decided to look into clinical trials," said Brie.

As an oncology nurse, [clinical trials](#) were not a foreign concept to Brie. "When the option was presented to me, I didn't second guess it," she said. In fact, she was hearing more and more about cell therapy through her job recently, and it came up again at this point in her journey. Additional help from Brie's aunt, who worked as a nurse practitioner for a lung surgeon, steered Brie in the direction of Dr. Nikhil Khushalani, Vice Chair for the Department of Cutaneous Oncology at Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida.

Dr. Khushalani brought forth the possibility of a clinical trial testing [Tumor Infiltrating Lymphocyte \(TIL\) Therapy](#). Brie was officially enrolled in December of 2023. After receiving the therapy – now FDA approved for advanced melanoma in the second-line setting and currently being tested in the first-line in clinical trials – routine scans showed incremental increases in her lung and adrenal gland metastases. After about nine months of similar results, Brie and her care team were ready to explore new options.

Exploring Emerging Treatment Options

Multiple specialists put their heads together to consider the best next step for Brie. A clinical trial exploring tebentafusp ([KIMMTRAK](#)) – the first and only therapy to earn FDA approval specifically for metastatic or unresectable uveal melanoma – was being tested in patients with cutaneous melanoma and was presented as an option. While considering this, Brie was introduced to MRA's Chief Operating Officer Dr. Marc Hurlbert through a friend and fellow melanoma advocate. Dr. Hurlbert sat down with Brie and her family to discuss her journey and possible new directions, ultimately agreeing on the trial as the best next step.

Despite the hope felt by Brie and her loved ones for a new direction, she faced several uphill battles in gaining access to the trial. Finding a study location close enough to her home in South Carolina, getting insurance approval, and meeting all the inclusion criteria were significant barriers. Through persistence in advocating for herself, doing her own research, and with the support of her community, Brie was ultimately able to clear all hurdles.

Finally in January 2025, Brie enrolled in her second clinical trial and traveled to Mayo Clinic in

Jacksonville, Florida for treatment. Today, she is still enrolled in the trial, but recent scans have shown disappointing results. “I’m not ready to stop fighting,” said Brie. “This disease could potentially take my life and take me away from my family, and that’s not an option for me right now.”

Caregiver Support as a Critical Part of a Cancer Journey

As Brie navigates this trying time, she can’t help but speak about her family and the care they have provided over the years since her initial diagnosis. Her husband Mat has regularly stayed home with their daughters and provided stability and comfort for them, allowing Brie to travel for treatment and exploratory discussions with doctors. This support continues to give Brie the peace of mind and confidence needed to be her own best advocate.

Brie’s mom and older sister Jill have also stepped up to help her in countless ways. “It has always been the three of us on this life journey, no matter what,” shared Jill. “This time was no different.” Both women have taken time from work and their personal lives to join Brie in her research, discussions, and travels. Their unwavering logistical and emotional support has been paramount in keeping the momentum going for Brie, despite any setbacks.

Brie acknowledges the unique challenges that her family members face as caregivers, and the importance of them remembering to prioritize their self-care, too, so that they don’t become burnt out. “Getting your hopes up and then being let down is exhausting, but we never let it kill our spirit,” remarked Brie.

Together, Brie and her loved ones agree that they won’t ever take ‘no’ for an answer. “If this current treatment doesn’t work, I’m going to look for the next treatment, as long as my body keeps fighting,” Brie said. To those facing a similar battle, Brie and her family want them to know that they aren’t alone.

This story was published by the [Melanoma Research Alliance](#) on April 22, 2025. It is republished with permission.