

Going Above and Beyond

UNH honored for supporting colleague through emotional living donor journey

Tuesday, May 17, 2022



SALLY NELSON IS SURROUNDED BY MANY OF THE COLLEAGUES WHO SUPPORTED HER THROUGH AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY AS A LIVING ORGAN DONOR AT A CEREMONY IN WHICH UNH WAS AWARDED A DONATE LIFE EMPLOYER RECOGNITION AWARD FROM DONATE LIFE AMERICA ON MONDAY, MAY 16.

Sally Nelson didn't really start feeling the nerves until she was a few steps away from the hospital door.

She was about to donate a portion of her liver to friend Mark Cervantes, who was in the midst of a lengthy battle with cancer. She'd jumped at the opportunity to help a friend in need and had

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never given it a second thought, even despite two lengthy postponements of the procedure. But as she approached the entrance that December morning, the weight of the moment finally began sinking in.

It was Cervantes himself, striding alongside her, that helped her fend off the anxiety.

“I was scared because there are so many unknowns with a surgery, and there would be a good deal of pain” Nelson says.

“But I thought about Mark’s unending strength through all that he’d gone through. Walking beside him, I said, ‘I can do this.’”

She would soon come to realize – through many emotional twists and turns and ultimately a heartbreaking loss – that there were a lot more people she could draw strength from.



SALLY NELSON WITH MARK CERVANTES. (COURTESY PHOTO)

Cervantes passed away nine months after the transplant, a result of COVID-related complications. But throughout her own months-long journey – including the logistical gymnastics required to coordinate the procedure and the roller-coaster of emotions and grief that followed – Nelson

credits her colleagues at the School of Marine Science and Ocean Engineering (SMSOE) at UNH with keeping her afloat.

For that she nominated UNH for a Donate Life Employer Recognition award from Donate Life America, and the university was selected as one of four winners in New England this year.

The award was presented Monday morning at a ceremony on

campus.

“I feel so blessed to work with the people I work with. They helped me during some of my deepest moments,” Nelson, administrative coordinator at SMSOE, says. “I can honestly say that I don’t know how I would have survived without them.”

The honor is a tangible recognition of the unwavering support Nelson received for months from her coworkers. Her supervisor, Diane Foster – director of SMSOE – and others in her department were quick to help prepare for her time off and adjusted that schedule without question when the procedure was postponed twice.

During the most difficult moments, Nelson’s kitchen was always stocked with homemade meals and other food essentials. Her inbox and her mailbox were flooded with supportive and caring messages. Flowers arrived at seemingly regular intervals.

“The people I’ve worked with at UNH have a very unique bond,” Nelson says. “It’s not just about your work, it’s not just a job – we spend more time with our colleagues than we do with our family sometimes, and I can tell you that this group I work with, we are a part of each other. We are each other’s family.”

That connection marks the beginning of the story, as well. Both Mark and his wife, Val Cervantes, are former coworkers of Nelson’s. When Nelson heard that Mark was battling cancer and in need of a living donor, she immediately volunteered to help.

The procedure was first scheduled for April of 2020 – when the world initially shut down due to COVID, causing a postponement. In June, Nelson got word that the surgery was back on, but it was delayed yet again just days ahead when it became clear that Mark’s tumor markers were too high for the procedure.

With just two weeks of lead time,

Nelson learned in November that the

"I feel so blessed to

surgery would ultimately be set for Dec. 9, 2020. After having adapted to Nelson's leave time being moved twice, her department once again sprang into action. Sam Claussen had been scheduled to accept a new position and leave UNH during Nelson's leave, but she negotiated a delayed start date with her future employer to help cover while Nelson was out.

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Nelson's daughter started a "meal train" to provide food during her recovery, and within two hours of it being posted on social media, every slot was filled, mostly by colleagues, Nelson says.

"We had food coming nearly every day for four weeks," Nelson says. "The love and support was so overwhelming."

Nelson also received personal messages from leadership at UNH, including Provost Wayne Jones, and from members of SMSOE's external advisory board.

The support eventually extended beyond Nelson, too. While Mark was battling COVID, the meal train began providing food for Val and her 9-year-old granddaughter Maddie, as well. Mark was still sick when Nelson returned to work and ultimately needed dialysis due to kidney problems, and Nelson was able to rearrange her work schedule to take Mark to his appointments.

When Mark passed away on Sept. 17, 2021, the outpouring continued. Nelson was able to shuffle her workload and take the necessary time off to grieve and recalls a colleague stepping in to speak during a meeting when Nelson briefly became overwhelmed and couldn't continue. For Nelson, that moment was indicative of the empathy and support she received throughout the process.

The award provided an uplifting epilogue to a trying and draining ordeal, and ultimately illustrated what Nelson already knew about the familial atmosphere she's enjoyed at UNH.

"I was absolutely thrilled, because they deserve it so much," Nelson says. "It wasn't just support from my colleagues, but all of UNH. They've all made a lasting imprint on my life."

WRITTEN [Keith Testa](#) | Communications and Public Affairs

BY:

PHOTOGRAPHER [Jeremy Gasowski](#) | Communications and Public

Affairs | jeremy.gasowski@unh.edu | 603-862-4465

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The stories are written by the staff of **UNH Communications and Public Affairs**.

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