



# One Dose of HOPE

by Mindy Adams

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Photography: Cliff McBride

ANN CLAUSSEN  
SURVIVOR

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**ANN CLAUSSEN WAS SITTING WITH A FEW OF HER BOARD MEMBERS FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA HEALTH CARE AND THEIR CONSULTANT, WORKING ON A SUCCESSION PLAN FOR THEIR CURRENT CEO’S RETIREMENT.**

And that’s when she blurted it out. “I’d love to have that job,” she said.

That’s all she needed to say. The board voted unanimously to give her the job (as long as she promised to still bring her famous homemade desserts to their monthly meetings). So, at 52, Claussen switched careers. She left her job with State Farm after 27 years and, after serving for five years as a volunteer on the board, she became the chief executive officer of Central Florida Health Care in January 2014.

It was a huge professional shift, but for Claussen, it was a homecoming to the health care field.

“I went to nursing school at Polk Community College, I got a degree in health education from the University of South Florida, and I worked at Winter Haven Hospital as a utilization management coordinator for a little while,” she said. “I wanted to be helping people — people who need care and haven’t had the means for health insurance.”

Maybe it’s her background as a superintendent in State Farm’s Life and Health Underwriting department. Or the instinct she’s cultivated through nearly two decades of motherhood. Claussen has a sweet intention, a quiet focus, this understated determination that just gets it done. With nine nonprofit medical and dental clinics in three counties under her watch, there is definitely a lot to be done.

But just as Claussen began building a new legacy for Central Florida Health Care, her personal life began crumbling behind the scenes.

Near the same time she made the decision to transition into the CEO role, her dad was diagnosed with lung cancer.

“He went through 10 difficult weeks,” Claussen said. “He was on the chemotherapy pill; he got weak and fell, so he was in the hospital for two weeks. Then he transitioned to rehab and never made it out.”

Her father passed away on October 26, 2013.

Then her stepmom, whom Claussen has called “mom” since she was a child, started struggling with simple questions. She’d

ask: How was your day? How are the kids? A few minutes later, she’d ask the same thing.

“I just knew,” Claussen said, “that something wasn’t right.”

So, just weeks after her dad passed, Claussen was driving her stepmom to a local appointment for testing. Two suspicious spots in her brain led them to Moffitt. Doctors discovered cancer in her abdominal area, cancer that had spread to her brain, and there wasn’t anything they could do.

Claussen’s stepmom passed away on March 3, 2014.

In the middle of this whirlwind of grief, Claussen had her annual mammogram appointment “right on schedule.”

“It was just a regularly scheduled appointment,” she said. “You go in thinking that everything’s fine.”

Until she got a letter describing a dense area they’d spotted in her breast. She had to go back for an ultrasound.

“I had no symptoms at all. None,” Claussen said. “My first thought wasn’t worry. I just thought, ‘I’m so busy! I don’t have time to go in again.’”

She did go back, though, and a radiologist didn’t like what he saw, so he ordered a biopsy.

The results came three days later. Claussen was at work when the phone rang.

“I was in my office all by myself,” she said. “My family doctor said ‘breast cancer.’ I was thinking he had to have the wrong number. After everything I’d just been through.”

She sat there for two hours, alone, and cried.

“Then I thought: This is not the way to handle this,” she said. “I have to put my big girl pants on.”

When Claussen told her family the news, she reassured everyone that she was going to be OK.

“I didn’t allow anybody to cry,” Claussen said. “No pity parties. I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me, and I didn’t want anyone to get frantic. I just said: ‘We can deal with this.’”

And she did.

Claussen knew she wanted to talk to someone, to hear, candid and clear, more about her kind of cancer and her prognosis.



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She spoke with a local surgeon who explained the cancer. He settled her down. Claussen went back to her work clinic and discussed it with her clinic physicians, who recommended her to Moffitt. She scheduled an appointment, and less than a week later, she was walking in. That’s when she met Susan Hoover, M.D., her breast surgeon at Moffitt.

“When you find out you have cancer, you want answers quickly,” Claussen said. “I just loved Dr. Susan Hoover. She talked to me about all of the options. That’s when she told me about a new procedure that’s been done.”

Intraoperative radiation therapy (IORT) became an option for early-stage breast cancer patients in 2011. During this procedure, patients receive their radiation therapy during surgery, while they are still asleep. A lower-energy radiation is administered directly into the lumpectomy cavity (instead of through the skin, like more traditional therapy), so doctors can target the affected area with precision (without irritating the skin). It’s a one-time, one-dose treatment.

“[Dr. Hoover] said I might be a candidate,” Claussen said. “It sounded like a dream. What if I could get everything done in the same day?”

Claussen agreed to try IORT, but there were no guarantees. Dr. Hoover explained that radiation oncologist Roberto Diaz, M.D., P.h.D., would be in the operating room alongside her on June 3, 2014, to assist with the radiation portion of the procedure.

After the surgery, Claussen woke up to her husband’s face. “They did it,” he said.

“It was such a blessing to hear that,” Claussen said. “I didn’t need more radiation.”

If she had not had the IORT procedure, Claussen would have had radiation treatments five days a week for about a month and a half. Instead, she was able to get back to life right away. She was back to work two days after surgery. She made it to her family’s summer retreat in Michigan for the Fourth of July. (She wasn’t allowed to swim so soon after surgery, which was a good excuse to not have to ride on the back of a Jet Ski!) She was back to spin class and 10-mile weekend walks. She was back to opening up a new clinic and renovating another. 🐾

**AFTER ONE DOSE OF HOPE, ANN CLAUSSEN WAS BACK TO BEING THE CAREGIVER INSTEAD OF THE PATIENT.**