Vikki Pinkos couldn’t catch her breath. Her neck, webbed with lymphoma, had lost its shape. From the mass in her neck, fear grew. She was scared she would stop breathing.

But something else was growing, too. A baby girl, with the kicking power of an Olympic swimmer, grew inside her.

Pinkos remembers climbing up on the table for regular ultrasounds. And, when she was fighting for breath, she’d watch the screen, hope rising with her healthy daughter’s diaphragm, as she noted each organ: the brain, the kidneys, the heart.

Vikki Pinkos was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system that starts in white blood cells (lymphocytes), when she was seven months pregnant. She spent her final trimester fighting for her own life and nurturing a new one.

“Of all the things that can go wrong in a normal pregnancy, with all the odds stacked against me and Catherine,” she says, “how can you not say it’s a miracle?”

She received four chemotherapy treatments while she was pregnant.

“My family was scared, but I had a sense of peace,” she says. “I believe that God grants mothers special graces and I knew that everything would be all right.”

Catherine was born on August 20, 2004 – just four days after Pinkos received chemo. She had an emergency C-section on Friday. An oncology appointment the very next Tuesday. She didn’t finish chemo until December 2004. Radiation started in February 2005 and lasted five weeks. Finally, she had a PET scan at her six-month follow-up in July 2005.

Positive.
“When I got the call from my doctor, I was devastated,” she says. “I just didn’t believe that I had cancer again.”

They discussed treatment options. The prognosis, plans, procedure. She learned that she would need a bone marrow transplant. She’d be launching into chemo once again, just one week after baby Catherine’s first birthday. But she would be at Moffitt, close to home.

Pinkos was a patient once again – which isn’t easy for a registered nurse. But life often runs in full circles.

This is her incredible story.

Her voice tells you that her heart is light and strong. It’s the way she sings things when she talks. It’s the way her laugh skips about like a pixie. But when she pulls a story up from its well in her memory, it echoes with the quiet confidence of someone who knows how it feels to measure a day in breaths and heartbeats.

She was the kid who loved Creature Features, the little girl who would lean in when something “a little freaky” flickered on the screen instead of flinching or shuddering. Her mom worked as a phlebotomist at a south Florida hospital and, as soon as she could, so did Pinkos. After she graduated from high school, she started working there full time.

“I had an opportunity to read the charts and talk to the insurance companies,” she says. “I would read all kinds of things and, when I didn’t understand what I was reading, I wanted to know what they were. So, I looked things up, I asked questions. I realized that I wanted to go to nursing school.”

But it was loss, a step back a few years later, that finally pushed her to take a step toward her dream career. Cancer snatched two of her grandparents. They were just 66.

“When my grandparents were first ill, I was a teenager,” Pinkos says. “I was so detached. So the loss really shook me. I wished I had spent more time on the caregiver level with them, been more involved with them. I knew that I couldn’t make a difference for them then, but I could make a difference in the future.”

That’s why she’s sure she didn’t choose nursing. “Nursing,” she says, “chose me. I had fleeting thoughts back then. Wouldn’t it be great if I could help find a cure for cancer? All kinds of things went through my mind. What if I could work for a cancer center? Wouldn’t it be great to have a center named after them [her grandparents]?”

So, after working in health care for a decade, Pinkos started a nursing program when she was 28. And she graduated when she was 31 – in 2001.

She spent several years working on a surgical floor, soaking up experience every day, healing with medicine and compassion. How could she know, as she scurried from patient to patient,

“I make it my personal mission to leave an everlasting imprint of hope.”
Vikki Pinkos
Survivor + Mother + Nurse
“I had the will to live. I was faced with the challenge to muster up the courage to fight. It wasn’t easy, to say the least.”

She works each day to share her own dose of hope.

Hope is feeling the fierce kicks of your unborn baby girl and living to see your nine-year-old daughter kick across the pool in a swim meet – your “beautiful, healthy, smart, strawberry blonde child.” Hope is your husband waking you up to give you medicine, feeding your newborn and walking the dog while you sleep off the effects of chemo and then just sitting right beside you to calm the panic that quakes beneath your skin.

Hope is recognizing the very fear you lived in your patients’ eyes, meeting them where they are and never leaving them there, “holding their hearts and hands and cheering them on to the finish line, wherever that may be.”

“I make it my personal mission,” Pinkos says, “to leave an everlasting imprint of hope.”

Pinkos was 100 percent sure she would beat those odds.

“I had the will to live,” she says. “I was faced with the challenge to muster up the courage to fight. It wasn’t easy, to say the least.”

First, it was high-dose chemo. Again. And, again, she looked ahead of the moment, ahead of the treatments, ahead to holding and playing with her baby Catherine.

On January 4, 2006, she received a lifesaving stem cell transplant. After that, sickness settled in. Nausea and fatigue overtook her. Anxiety raced against sanity through her veins.

“I wanted so badly to believe everything was going to be okay,” Pinkos says. “But I was afraid I was going to go to sleep and not wake up. I didn’t want to die.”

It was all the life around her that charged her: “Heaven-sent angels.” She credits her recovery, in part, to every single person who came into her room and shared a little time, a few hope-filled minutes that inflated her joy and pushed away the pain.

She remembers one such individual – a kind lady who came to clean her room each day, telling stories about her dog, a boxer. She would spend a few extra moments cleaning just to talk.

“It was a sweet escape,” Pinkos says. “My mind wandered off to a happy place. Those five-minute increments helped me put one foot in front of the other and forge ahead.” And she did forge ahead.

Fast forward to 2011. Pinkos began her career at Moffitt: a personal steppingstone, an intersection, a familiar path. She was now working in the same place that had worked to heal her. And, sometimes, she even pulls out her phone to share a picture of her time as a Moffitt patient – the one where she’s bald, with a fatter face, and she thinks she looks just like Uncle Fester from The Addams Family.

“I’m a survivor. That’s why I’m here. It helps me deliver better care,” Pinkos says. “One of the things that people underestimate is that it’s not just the medicine in the syringe that helps people – especially cancer patients. Sure, I give medicine to relieve pain and side effects, but the encouragement, support and patience – the importance of that should never be underestimated.”