

30 Years of NURSING

FOR LORI FOX MOFFITT *is* HOME

By Michelle Bearden

Lori Fox was just 24, fresh-faced and a young mother, when she made a decision that would change the course of her life.

Recently transplanted to Tampa from upstate New York and a new graduate of nursing school, Fox applied to several hospitals for her first-ever job in her chosen profession.

One was located in downtown Tampa, and another in Brandon. The third, north of the city's core, hadn't even opened yet. But that was the one that intrigued her.

"I LOVED THE IDEA OF BEING A PART OF A NEW BEGINNING," FOX RECALLS. "HERE WAS THE ONLY CANCER INSTITUTE IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA, BUILT WITH CIGARETTE-TAX MONEY. MOFFITT CANCER CENTER HAD SUCH A PROMISING FUTURE WITH ITS MISSION."

It also had a pediatrics unit with classrooms and a fulltime teacher, brightly painted murals on the walls and the big playroom with toys. Fox had once aspired to be a pediatrician, so she felt this was the best fit for her.

A NEW BEGINNING

On the day she learned she had passed her boards, she got the job offer from Moffitt.

Fox and another "green" nurse – neither had ever worked in the field yet – joined other recruits in a six-week orientation session prior to Moffitt's opening. It was intensive and at times difficult, but she loved the challenge. Her fellow rookie student dropped out after a few weeks. Not so Fox.

"I wanted to fight through and was eager to learn about oncology," she recalls.

That was 30 years ago. And Fox, one of the center's first nurses, is still with Moffitt though both she and the center have changed through those years. Moffitt has grown from 409 employees to the current 5,200. Fox has worked in three departments, raised two children as a single mom and earned a certification

in oncology. When she was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, this is where she got treatment.

"You make choices in life and you don't know at the time if they are the right ones," says Fox. "No doubt about it, coming to Moffitt was the right one for me. This is home. This is my second family."

BORN TO BE A NURSE

Fox's own mother had started on this same path to becoming a nurse, but had to abandon it because of finances and family obligations.

"It was a way to carry on my mom's dream," Fox says. The best part: Her mother, who died five years ago, lived to see her daughter's success in oncology nursing.

Another motivating factor: When Fox was 18, her best friend was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. Going through that experience with her friend – who is now cancer-free – further convinced Fox that she had a calling. It just felt right.

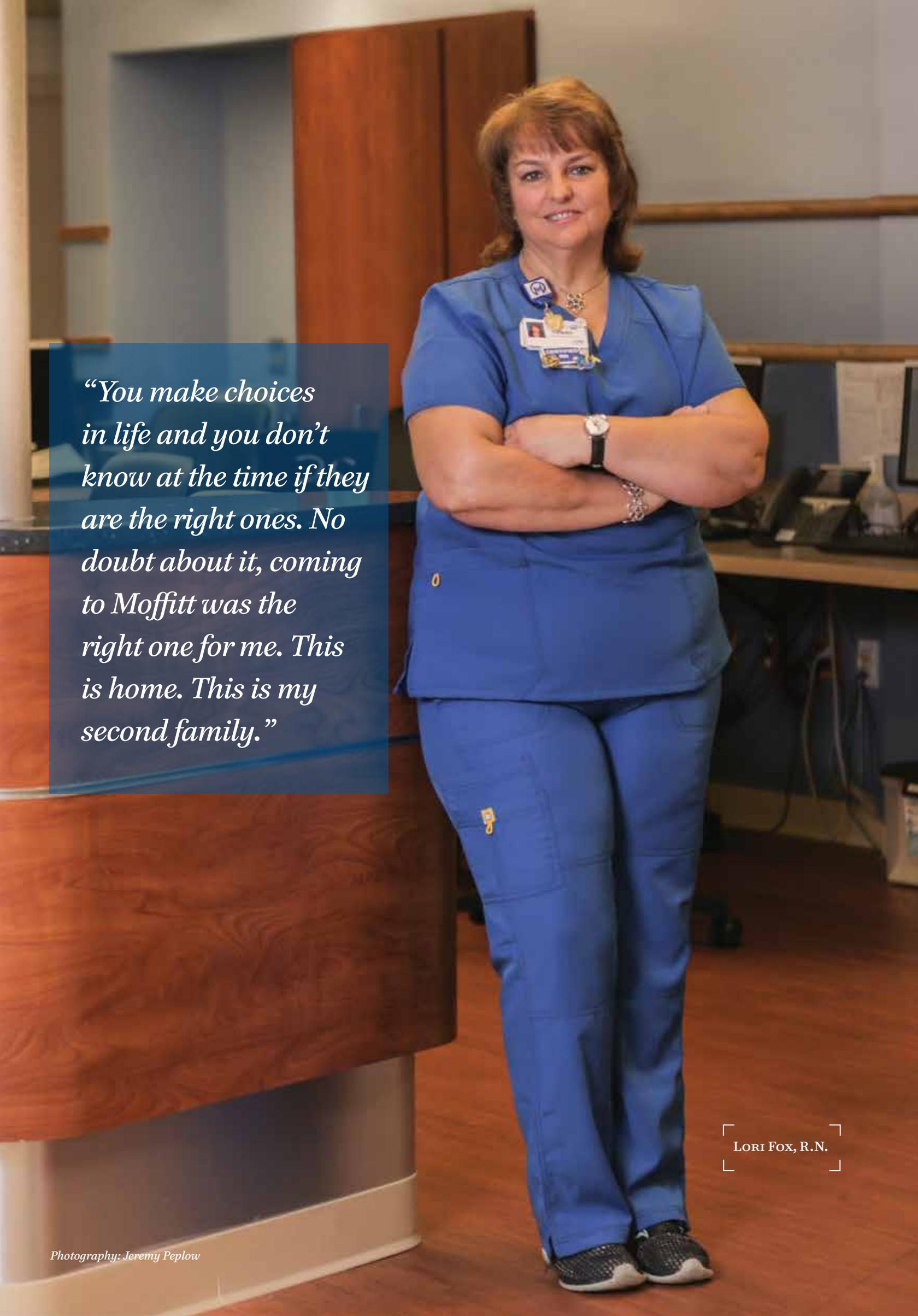
So did working in the pediatrics unit. Fox worked there from the first day until 1994, when Moffitt transitioned pediatric cancer care to All Children's Hospital (now known as Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg).

Caring for cancer patients, from babies to teens, was everything Fox had dreamed of and more. Some of the most poignant memories in her 30-year career – both happy and sad – come from the days she spent there.

She remembers the 16-year-old cheerleader with a mass on the end of her femur. Her family was gathered around her hospital bed the night before surgery when the doctor broke the news that there was a possibility he would have to remove her leg.

"We all cried, every last one of us," she says. The next day, when the surgeon discovered it was just a benign growth, they shed tears again – of happiness.

And there was 11-year-old Michael in the final stages of leukemia. His mother had crawled in bed with him, cradling her son. Fox was at the nurse's station when Michael's aunt came up to her.

A woman with short brown hair, wearing blue scrubs, stands in a hospital setting with her arms crossed. She is wearing a watch on her left wrist and a necklace. A blue semi-transparent box on the left side of the image contains a quote. The background shows a wooden reception desk and a computer workstation.

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LORI FOX, R.N.



Fox was at a hematology conference that weekend in January 2012 and couldn't get comfortable.

"It was like a toothache in my left thigh. This aching, sharp pain that wouldn't go away," she recalls.

By the time she returned home Sunday night, she knew something was wrong. She went to a nearby emergency room. The doctor on duty made a decision that may have saved her life.

"He could have just given me pain medication and sent me home. Instead, he ordered a CT scan to see what was going on," she says.

After reading the report, he came back into the room and broke the news: She had a major mass on her left kidney pressing on a nerve. Fox was shocked at the eventual diagnosis: Renal cell carcinoma, or kidney cancer.

"It's indescribable what goes through your mind," Fox says. But being an oncology nurse gave her strength. For years, she had worked alongside cancer patients and watched their courage. Now she drew upon their example.

Because her tumor was encapsulated, surgeons were able to remove it and not require any extensive treatment. Though she suffered a few complications post-surgery, Fox was able to return to work 12 weeks later.

She couldn't wait to get back.

SURVIVORSHIP: NAVIGATING ISSUES AND MOVING FORWARD

"Now I can truly relate to what they're going through," she says. "It's possible to go back to doing all the things you love. It's my turn to be the example."

*"This is my destiny.
I'm just where I should be."*

She encourages patients to take advantage of Moffitt's Survivorship Clinic, opened in 2009 to help navigate issues related to life after cancer. And she tells them how she got through her experience by embracing the support of family, her tight-knit circle of colleagues and friends.

What next for her life? Plenty, says Fox, who is now cancer-free.

Her new motto? "If there's an opportunity to go, I'm going," she says. A cruise to Spain, Italy and Greece is planned for this fall.

The rewards for choosing oncology nursing, and in particular, Moffitt, come to her every day. Like the patient who told her, "Thank you for coming to work today. You're keeping me alive." She believes she is one lucky woman.

"This is my destiny," Fox says. "I'm just where I should be." 

"Lori, I think you need to come in," she said, a devastating look in her eyes.

Fox entered the room. Michael had died and his mother was sleeping, still hold him tightly. She touched the mother's shoulder ever so slightly to wake her.

"That's part of this job. The highs, the lows. You have to learn to leave it at the hospital or it will tear you up," Fox says.

THRIVING THROUGH CHANGE

As in most professions, Fox has had to learn new technology and embrace continuing education. She's weathered change, too. When the pediatrics unit closed, she took a position with Moffitt's infusion center. Last year, she accepted the clinical lead position in the McKinley Outpatient Center blood draw unit.

"We're the first stop for most patients, so I get to see them as they start their day. It's my opportunity to give them some positivity."

There's no better person for that role, says fellow Moffitt nurse Vicki Dugger. The two women have been friends since meeting at the center more than two decades ago.

"If I was a patient, Lori is the nurse I would want on my team," Dugger says. "She exemplifies what an awesome oncology nurse should be."

Fox's kind nature extends to colleagues as well. When Dugger's daughter died at 31, Fox was right there for her— to give her a hug, a listening ear or whatever the grieving mother needed.

There's a reason Fox is so compassionate. She understands what it's like to be on the other side. Like many of her patients, she's a survivor, too.