



## Richland County Health Department

# Soul Survivors

Issue No. 2 | December, 2022

As I reflect on 2022, I would like to send gratitude to the survivorship community for working with Richland County Health Department this year. Our first Soul Survivor Newsletter was distributed in May of 2022 right when we were working together to supply the county with an educational event at City Brew Hall in Wahpeton.

For those who were able to attend, it was sure an eventful night! Besides the weather, the event was so enlightening and inspiring! We were able to learn about mindfulness with Andrea Paradis and Dr. Chery Hysjulien from Roger Maris Cancer Center and hear Jill Skilling's cancer survivor story.

In June, Relay for Life held their Carnival for a Cure at Chahinkapa Park and WOW what an event! I look forward to putting this newsletter together and hope that you find it helpful. Thank you to those who share their story. Wishing everyone health and happiness in 2023.



**Miranda Andel, RN**  
Richland County  
Health Dept.

### A Life-Saving Colonoscopy A Cancer Survivor's Story

I can still picture the clinic room I was recovering in when I got the news. I was waking up from a colonoscopy and the doctor, a nurse, and my wife were sitting in the room with me. I thought I would resort to a good old dad-joke to resolve any inconvenience I caused being a patient that day. I found it weird when no one would at least give me a courtesy chuckle. The doctor was unphased and instead informed me that a mass was found during the scope. Everything at that point gets a little blurry, but by the end of the day, I knew that I may have cancer,

and that life was never going to be the same for me and the people close to me.

I'd like to backtrack a little bit to explain how I got to the decision to get what ended up being a life-saving colonoscopy. For many years prior, I hadn't done the best I could to take care of myself. I was active but made a lot of poor diet choices. In 2019, I visited my general doctor to see what I could do about trouble with going to the bathroom. He said I had hemorrhoids and prescribed me some medicine that would help.

In the summer of 2020, even though I had been going to the gym more consistently and was trying to eat healthier at the time, I was still having some issues with hemorrhoids. I went back to my doctor, and he referred me to a surgeon who removed them for me a few weeks later. Afterwards, the surgeon suggested I get a colonoscopy to make sure there wasn't anything else going on. Normally I avoid doctors' offices whenever I can, but I felt that I should follow the doctor's advice and schedule the colonoscopy.

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# A Life-Saving Colonoscopy

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Continued from page 1.

Fast forward to the week after the colonoscopy, I had a CT scan and surgery consult where doctors confirmed I had colon cancer of unknown stage. My team suggested they remove the mass in my colon soon. Within the next few weeks, I had in-patient surgery that removed the mass, some lymph nodes, and a portion of my colon. During recovery, I met with my oncologist where he officially diagnosed me with Stage III-A colon cancer. It wasn't quite the notoriety I was looking for, but he said, at 36, I was the youngest colon cancer patient he had that year. Although my oncologist considered me cancer free after the surgery, he suggested chemotherapy to give me a better chance of the cancer not returning. Due to my age and condition, I was able to do a more aggressive but shorter-term treatment. After recovering from my surgery, I began 4 rounds of chemotherapy. Each round involved blood tests, a 2-3 hour infusion, and two weeks of pills followed by a week of recovery before starting the next round. My treatments started just before Thanksgiving 2020 and ended in early February 2021. Throughout the chemo treatments, I felt nauseous and had some pain. The biggest side effects for me were loss of appetite, tiredness, and neuropathy in my hands, especially when dealing with a North Dakota winter. Knowing what many other cancer patients go through, I feel my experience was milder than average. I never lost any hair, only missed a few days of work, didn't have to be hospitalized or need a port put in, and my blood tests stayed consistent so I received every treatment on time.

After a few months of recovery, on May 6th, 2021, I met with my oncologist and got the news my family and I had been waiting for. I was officially cancer free. It is tradition to ring the bell after completing treatment at Roger Maris Cancer center. I suddenly felt a very strong imposter syndrome feeling. Why do I get this privilege? What did I do to get out this easy? I had been through a whole cancer crisis in less than a year, and shouldn't suffer any long-term consequences. I was still in the exam room when I had this discussion with my wife and my oncology nurse, who had seen me almost every time we went to Roger Maris. They both assured me that I needed to ring the bell, reminding me that it brings hope to other people still fighting their battle. I rang the bell and am still glad that I did.

Throughout the whole process, I had an amazing amount of support. My wife carried our family through it all. She came with me to my appointments, took care of me, 2 kids, 3 dogs, and a house, in the middle of a pandemic. Both sides of our family did anything we asked to help us, even though both live an hour or more away. My best friend did an internet deep dive into how he could support me, and our friends and co-workers showed support. They arranged a meal train, helped with snow removal, sent gift cards, and finished a previously scheduled home remodel. We also received countless prayers, text messages, and encouragement on social media.

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# A Life-Saving Colonoscopy

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Continued from page 2.

One of the most significant things that helped me through my battle happened while I was in the room with the surgeon the day of my colonoscopy. He didn't know for sure what was ahead of me, but said in his experience, people that come ready to fight generally do better than people who come with a dejected or defeated attitude. I took that sentiment to heart, especially as the treatments got tougher. The other motivators for me were coming home to my wife and sons, looking forward to favorite pastimes like racing and hunting, and planning an "I Beat Cancer" trip after I finished treatment.

As I reflect on my cancer experience, I'm grateful for all the medical staff that took part in my care. Every nurse, doctor, specialist I encountered was compassionate and supportive. I only wish I had gotten a colonoscopy sooner. Post-surgery, I was told that had I waited a few months later, it may have been too late. I also learned that, thanks to my early diagnosis, my sons will now have to be screened in their mid-20's. I hope this saves them from having to go through what I went through. Since completing treatment, I have been trying to eat healthier and stay active so that I'm able to handle any challenge that may come in the future. While I would prefer to never have to fight this fight again, I will never forget how amazing it was to have so many people support me in my time of need.



## **Patrick Brejcha, Wilkin Soil & Water Conservation District**

After Patrick's diagnosis, he decided to make a career change from 911 Dispatcher to a conservation Field Technician to spend more time with family. He enjoys working out in the field and serves his community as a member of the Wahpeton Fire Department. He is married with 2 kids and loves racing dirt-track oval cars, hunting, and traveling.

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# Never too Late

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Quit Smoking? Isn't it too late for me, I already have cancer.... Even after a cancer diagnosis one can experience many health benefits with quitting. Did you know that quitting smoking can improve cancer treatment outcomes? It's true, according to the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, smoking can impact the metabolism of chemotherapy, increase the risk of radiation therapy complications, and decrease treatment response of radiation therapy. Smoking also can increase postoperative complications and mortality after cancer surgery. Smokers tend to have increased surgical site infection rates, cardiovascular and pulmonary complications, and poor wound healing. Quitting prior to surgery can decrease these complications, even when done shortly before surgery is needed. [1]

It's NEVER too late to quit smoking. Quitting can be easy for some and challenging for many. If only there was a one size fits all quitting plan. It may take 1-5 times trying before you are successful. Don't get discouraged, stop being so hard on yourself! Nicotine is a highly addictive drug tobacco companies intentionally altered to get you addicted.

There are lots of resources out there to help you be successful in quitting tobacco. Whether it is over the phone, online or face-to-face counseling, we are here to help you quit. Meeting with a Tobacco Treatment Specialist can help you create your own individualized quitting plan. A plan that will work for you based on your own individual needs. Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) is available to help you manage cravings and lessen withdrawal symptoms. Many tobacco cessation programs offer free NRT to patients. Tobacco treatment has come a long way, we have options to help you.

If you are thinking about quitting, but want to try on your own first, that's okay. Here are a few tips:

1. Pick a quit date in the future, give yourself time to get ready to quit
2. Announce to family, friends, or coworkers your plans to quit, ask for support
3. Preplan for difficult times where relapse may occur
4. Dispose cigarettes, ashtrays and lighters from your home, work, and vehicles
5. Talk to your primary care provider, pharmacist, or tobacco treatment specialist if you are worried about cravings.

At the Richland County Health Department, we can offer our Richland County residents up to 8 weeks of FREE Nicotine Replacement Therapy (nicotine patches, gum, or lozenges) along with face-to-face counseling sessions. We are also able to assist you with signing up with NDQuits. Contact Lindsey Bommersbach at 701-642-7735.

Additional resources: Contact your Local Public Health Department, primary care health clinics in your area, call 1.800.QUIT.NOW (1.800.784.8669), or go online <https://www.health.nd.gov/ndquits>, [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

[1]National Comprehensive Cancer Network. Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology Smoking Cessation Version 2.2022. [www.nccn.org](http://www.nccn.org) November 10, 2022.



**Lindsey Bommersbach RRT, TTS**  
**Richland County Health Department**

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# The Importance of a Healthcare Directive

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It always surprises me in my job how many people I meet who have never thought about completing a healthcare directive. A healthcare directive is important for many reasons, but the first and foremost is that it helps others know what type of medical care you want.

We can assume that our closest loved ones would know what we want if faced with a medical challenge, but when that time comes and emotions are high, it can be challenging for our family or friends to have to make those decisions with no written guidance. Having a healthcare directive gives your loved ones a peace of mind, minimizes stress, and reduces potential conflicts amongst family members. Your family has the peace of knowing that you have already made the decision for them, and that their only job in those moments is to honor your wishes that you have put down on paper.

Your healthcare directive can be as general or as explicit as you want. It is your document to express your values and your desires, not just your medical wishes. You can appoint a healthcare agent to make decisions for you, write your request for any spiritual care or visitors you may want, and specify where you want to stay at end-of-life, such as hospice at home. The best gift you can give your family is having difficult conversations and completing your healthcare directive!



**Jena Tolbert, LSW, LBSW,  
APHSW-C**

Jena is a social worker at CHI Health at Home and Hospice in Breckenridge, MN. She is a licensed social worker and is a certified Advanced Palliative Hospice Social Worker (APHSW-C). She is also the volunteer coordinator for the agency and is responsible for assigning volunteers to clients receiving hospice care. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact her at 218-643-2275.

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# Is My Food Safe?: Artificial Sugars

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Written: June 15, 2022—By: Julie Lanford, MPH, RD, CSO, LDN

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## What is the difference between artificial and natural sweeteners?

### Synthetic (artificial) sweeteners:

Sugars chemically modified in a lab that do not contain fiber, vitamins, minerals and do not provide calories or energy to the body. Artificial sweeteners are a substitute for sugar made by chemically altering sugars or amino acids. They are commonly found in certain “sugar free” soft drinks, baked goods, candy, puddings, jellies, and dairy products. Synthetic, or artificial sweeteners are in contrast to natural sweeteners.

### Natural sweeteners:

Sugars found naturally in foods (e.g., glucose and fructose). Natural sugar provides energy to the body and comes in a variety of forms such as glucose, sucrose, and fructose. Sucrose is the most common natural sweetener. Basically, this is just table sugar, brown sugar, or other common syrups like corn syrup or simple syrup. Sucrose is made of two basic sugars, fructose and glucose, bonded together. When we consume sucrose, our digestive system breaks up the bonds and we absorb the fructose and glucose separately. Glucose is absorbed into the blood and carried for use by all our cells. Fructose is absorbed as fructose and then converted by the liver into a glucose-like substance that is treated as glucose by the body. Fructose is also naturally found in fruit. Hence why it is called “fruit sugar.”

### Stevia – a different kind of sweetener.

Stevia is an interesting case! Technically stevia is a natural, non nutritive sweetener. It's natural, as it is grown as a plant. In fact, I grow stevia in my back yard! You can eat the leaves and taste their sweetness. My kids love them. I often will brew the stevia leaves along with mint leaves for a sweet mint drink.



Stevia plants are also processed in a lab to create white powder sweetener, or liquid based sweetener that can be added at home, or by food companies into prepared foods. Stevia is good for sweetening cool foods, and you can bake with it, but not above 400 degrees. The FDA considers Stevia to be “generally recognized as safe.”

## How are artificial sweeteners regulated?

The FDA provides risk assessment recommendations for the consumption of non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS) based upon scientific studies or a substantial history of consumption by humans.

The FDA has approved these NNSs as safe for use in foods and beverages:

- Aspartame (NutraSweet® and Equal®)
- Acesulfame-K (Sweet One®)
- Neotame
- Saccharin (Sweet'N Low®)
- Sucralose (Splenda®)

Currently there is no evidence that use of any of the available non-nutritive sweeteners increases the risk of cancer in humans.

## How do they compare to real/ cane sugar?

Artificial sweeteners contain 0 grams of sugar and are much sweeter per volume than natural sugar. For some people, artificial sweeteners can cause uncomfortable gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, cramping, and indigestion.

## How do they affect our health?

**Dental cavities:** Replacing sugar-sweetened products with those sweetened with NNS reduces the risk of dental caries. In particular, the sugar alcohols such as erythritol and xylitol do not feed oral bacteria like sugar does (the bacteria that cause cavities).

**Diabetes:** NNS do not have any effect on blood sugars, making it a common sugar replacement for sugar for individuals with diabetes.

**Weight control:** Scientific evidence suggests that NNS can be beneficial for short term weight control. However, the effectiveness for long term weight loss is unknown.

**Headaches:** Consumption of aspartame has been shown to trigger migraine headaches in a small number of people.

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## Is My Food Safe?: Artificial Sugars

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Continued from page 6.

### Who should avoid non-nutritive sweeteners?

People with bowel disorders should be cautious with regular use of products sweetened with NNS. Many NNS, may cause a disruption in the normal gut bacteria and aggravate symptoms in those with various types of bowel disorders including

- Malabsorption syndromes
- Irritable Bowel Disease
- Dumping syndromes

Even among individuals with no bowel disorders, NNS may cause gas, bloating, and diarrhea. If artificial sweeteners cause you these negative side effects, common sense says to stay away!

### Putting it all together:

- Non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS) are high-intensity sweeteners and are typically noncaloric or very low in calories. Some NNS are naturally occurring, plant-derived products, while others are synthetic.
- In the United States, NNS are not required to be listed on food or drink labels unless a threshold amount per serving is reached; saccharin is the only sweetener for which disclosure of the exact amount present in a food product is required.

### The Big Picture:

Artificial sweeteners are well regulated and there is no evidence to suggest that they cause cancer in quantities approved for use in food. Some artificial sweeteners may cause stomach distress in individuals and it is an individuals choice as to whether they want to consume artificial sweeteners.

Personally, I only consume artificial sweeteners in a diet drink here and there. At home, I use table sugar, brown sugar, or stevia leaves to sweeten my beverages!

So should you use artificial or natural sugars? The decision is yours, and you should make the decision based on the factors that are unique to you as an individual!

## Protein Smoothie Recipe

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This protein smoothie is quick and easy. It is a great way to get in protein and vegetables in a meal without having to cook a lot. Just get the ingredients and blend them up and you're getting a quick meal with lots of nutrients.

- Author: Julie Lanford
- Total Time: 10 minutes

### Ingredients

- 1 cup plain kefir
- 1/4 cup ground flaxseed
- 1 cup kale
- 1 frozen banana
- 1 cup of frozen blueberries
- 1/3 cup juice/milk
- 2 scoops Enu powder

### Instructions

1. Take all ingredients and put them into a blender.
2. Blend until smooth and enjoy



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**Health Department**

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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