

Doctor in 1999 South Pole rescue dies in Mass.

June 24 2009, By MARK PRATT , Associated Press Writer



FILE - In this 1999 file photo released by the National Science Foundation, Dr. Jerri Nielsen, a National Science Foundation physician, is shown at the ceremonial South Pole. Dr. Jerri Nielsen FitzGerald, whose struggle against breast cancer during a winter at the South Pole captivated the world, died Tuesday, June 23, 2009, at their home in Southwick, Mass, said her husband, Thomas Fitzgerald. The cause was cancer. She was 57.(AP Photo/National Science Foundation, File)

(AP) -- Dr. Jerri Nielsen FitzGerald, who diagnosed and treated her own breast cancer before a dramatic rescue from the South Pole a decade ago, has died after the disease recurred. She was 57.

Her husband, Thomas FitzGerald, said she died Tuesday at their home in Southwick, Mass. Her cancer had been in remission until it returned in

August 2005, he said Wednesday.

She was the only doctor among 41 staff at the National Science Foundation's Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station in winter 1999 when she discovered a lump in her breast. At first, she didn't tell anyone, but the burden became too much to bear.

"I got really sick," she told The Associated Press in a 2003 interview. "I had great big lymph nodes under my arm. I thought I would die."

Rescue was out of the question. Because of the extreme weather conditions, the station is closed to the outside world for the winter. She had no choice but to treat the disease herself, with help from colleagues she trained to care for her and U.S.-based doctors she stayed in touch with via satellite e-mail.

She performed a biopsy on herself with the help of staff.

A machinist helped her with her IV and test slides, and a welder helped with chemotherapy.

She treated herself with anti-cancer drugs delivered during a gripping mid-July 1999 airdrop by a U.S. Air Force plane in blackout, freezing conditions.

In a headline-grabbing rescue, she was lifted by the Air National Guard that October, one of the earliest flights ever into the station when it became warm enough - 58 degrees below zero - to make the risky flight.

After multiple surgeries in the U.S., including a mastectomy, the cancer went into remission.

"More and more as I am here and see what life really is, I understand

that it is not when or how you die but how and if you truly were ever alive," she wrote in an e-mail to her parents in June 1999 from the South Pole.

Nielsen FitzGerald never lost her adventurous spirit and even returned to desolate Antarctica several more times.

"She had incredible zest and enthusiasm for life," said her husband, whom she first met 23 years ago when they were both on vacation in the Amazon. "She was the kindest soul I ever met. She was intelligent, with a great sense of humor, and she lived each day to the fullest."

She documented her ordeal in the best-selling book "Ice Bound: A Doctor's Incredible Battle for Survival at the South Pole." It was later made into a TV movie.

The disease made her stronger, she said in November 2001.

"I would rather not have it. But the cancer is part of me. It's given my life color and texture. Everyone has to get something. Some people are ugly, some people are stupid. I get cancer," she said at lecture in Denver.

Nielsen FitzGerald spent the last decade speaking around the world about the cancer and how it changed her life, and she worked as a roving ER doctor in hospitals all over the Northeast.

"She fought bravely, she was able to make the best of what life and circumstance gave her, and she had the most resilience I have ever seen in anyone," said her husband. "She fought hard, and she fought valiantly."

The couple would have celebrated their third anniversary next week.

Indiana University cancer specialist Dr. Kathy Miller, who by e-mail and videoconference helped Nielsen treat herself for nearly five months before she could leave the [South Pole](#), said Nielsen's willingness to speak about her fight against cancer helped give hope to other cancer patients.

"She was very passionate about continuing to live her life," Miller said. "She continued to work for many years, she married again, she traveled extensively. I think that gave a lot of our patients hope that even when disease recurs life can still go on and we can still find a lot of good things in that life."

Miller said Nielsen's advocacy helped cancer patients much like that of Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong and actress Christina Applegate.

"It's easy to underestimate the importance of those public messages," Miller said. "We see increases in screenings when people who have public lives come forward in this way."

Nielsen FitzGerald's passion for life shone through during a visit to the University of Toledo medical school last October, even though her [cancer](#) had metastasized to the brain and she knew she did not have much time left, said vice provost Patricia Metting.

"You couldn't help but be moved by this woman and her profound words and just the optimism that she had," Metting said.

Besides her husband, the Youngstown, Ohio-area native and graduate of the University of Toledo medical school is survived by parents Lorine and Phil Cahill, brothers Scott Cahill and Eric Cahill and three children from a previous marriage, Julia, Ben and Alex.

Memorial and funeral arrangements were pending.

Associated Press writers Doug Whiteman in Columbus, Ohio, and Tom Davies in Indianapolis contributed to this report.

©2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Doctor in 1999 South Pole rescue dies in Mass. (2009, June 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-06-doctor-south-pole-dies-mass.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.