



*The following article was published April 13, 2007, in the sixth annual Health Care Heroes special publication produced by the San Antonio Business Journal. In addition to recognizing 14 people “making a difference in the health care field” in the region, the newspaper posthumously recognized **Talitha Karstens, R.N.**, an inspiring InGenesis employee who had lost her battle with cancer the previous year. Talitha’s mom received a healthcare award upon her daughter’s behalf at a gala reception held at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio.*

Cancer diagnosis led woman to pursue nursing, live her life

Editor’s Note: Talitha Michelle Karstens understood first-hand what patients might want in their nurse: All the time she studied for her profession and then worked in health care facilities she was fighting cancer, often participating in clinical trials. With this story, the Business Journal would like to recognize Karstens for the inspiration she provided to those who worked with her as well as those who might find such inspiration when reading about her.

BY PAULA SYPTAK PRICE

Talitha Michelle Karstens was the kind of nurse you wanted taking care of you or a loved one.

“She never had a complaint filed against her,” says Veronica Edwards, president of the staffing firm InGenesis. “That’s unusual when you consider her many difficult patients.”

At 5’3” with blond hair to her shoulders, and a heavy Kentucky drawl, she was smart, kind-hearted, and upbeat.

This well-loved young nurse died on Jan. 26 at age 36. She was carrying a secret that few knew about.

Until 1997, Karstens was living a fairly ordinary life in Greenville, Ky. She worked in the office of a grocery store. Like so many others, she donated blood during the local blood drive. Soon after, a letter arrived telling Karstens that she needed to see a doctor right away.

Eventually, she was diagnosed with Fibromalellar Hepatocellular Carcinoma (FHC), a rare variant of liver cancer. The worldwide incidence is approximately 200 cases per year.

Other than surgical resection of the liver, no successful forms of treatment are known. Karstens was told she had two to three months to live.

“Go home and get your things in order,” the doctor said.

The doctor was wrong — not about the diagnosis destined to end this young life, but about how much time she had left. She would live 10 more years and one month.

After the initial shock, Karstens took a month to decide whether she would attempt to fight it or not.

“She wanted everything to be as normal as possible, and no one was to talk about it — as if it didn’t exist,” recalls her mother Mary Goldston.

Experiencing more of life

When Karstens decided she wasn’t ready to die, she took action to reach some of her personal goals. First, she researched FHC on the Web for treatments and clinical trials to join. Her treatments started with surgery at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

“On her first surgery, they removed her spleen, part of her liver, and an adrenal gland,” says close friend Cenia Castillo. “The second time they removed her whole left lung.”

Karstens also decided to attend nursing school. Her mother was not surprised.

“As a child — and even more so as an adult — Talitha liked to make other people happy,” says Goldston. “She had thought of being a nurse before, but you know how you think time is endless?”

Karstens spent the next six semesters at Madisonville (Ky.) Community College.

She drove to M.D. Anderson for clinical trials — back and forth between Kentucky and Houston. She couldn’t fly. With only one lung, her chest couldn’t take the pressure in the airplane cabins.

She participated in a clinical trial, wearing a chemo pump to classes in a fanny pack 24/7. Another fanny pack held other medds for the pain and accompanying nausea. She lost all her hair and lots of weight.

But she didn’t complain. In 2000, Karstens graduated as class valedictorian.

“I sometimes think she was in a hurry to experience everything,” reflects Castillo.

Following graduation, she followed her then-husband to San Antonio. Her treatments continued at M.D. Anderson, and she eventually accepted a job at Baptist Hospital downtown.

“We met in 2001,” remembers Castillo, who was also a recent graduate at

the time. “We were the new kids on the block. We stuck together and helped each other.”

Everyone who met Karstens liked her, according to Castillo. Karstens was always the first to volunteer for assignments, and in the early years, never turned down difficult assignments, like dropping a nasogastric tube into the stomach. “I headed in the other direction if I heard about that one,” says Castillo. “I hate to drop those things.”

When Karstens overheard others talking about how they couldn’t get something done, she wasn’t shy about walking up and saying, “I know how to do that. Would you like me to try?”

Later, ready for a change, the two friends started working for Kindred Hospital. Then, in 2004, both moved again, to InGenesis, a health care staffing agency.

While at work, Karstens didn’t talk about the cancer, nor complain about pain. She couldn’t — that would blow her cover.

“Talitha didn’t so much keep a secret,” explains Goldston. “She just didn’t want someone who was ill to have empathy for her. She wanted to be strong for them.”

When doctors at M.D. Anderson could no longer help her, they referred her to the Cancer Therapy & Research Center for further clinical trials.

“You have no idea the tenacity of this woman,” says Castillo. “You can’t

imagine how driven she was. She could work with those drugs and the pain medication in her system.”

As close as the two friends were, Castillo never heard Karstens complain.

Castillo asked her once, “Don’t you ever get sad? Or mad? Or cry?”

“Why?” Karstens responded. “What’s crying going to do for me? It won’t help, so why cry?”

Giving of herself

During her three years at InGenesis, Karstens worked steadily at the VA Hospital. According to Edwards, Karstens often worked with paraplegics and others who could no longer walk. The work can be quite demanding.

“Probably one out of 20 will make it as an agency nurse at the VA Hospital,” says Edwards. “It’s a difficult assignment. The nurses I place at the VA are among the best. They have to be multi-tasked, very sharp, and able to handle difficult situations.”

According to Edwards, Karstens saw patient care as her calling. What made her a good nurse was her patient care skills and her uplifting attitude.

Says Edwards, “She was also very sensitive to what patients were going through.”

After the last clinical trial in 2004, Karstens went into a coma. Her liver was severely damaged by the four

years of treatment. Her parents, by her bedside, were told Karstens was dying, and it would take just a few hours. Yet she pulled through, and in a year was even able to return to work.

Edwards often urged the young nurse to take some time off for herself.

“Talitha said, ‘No,’” remembers Edwards. “She wanted to help others — it kept her mind off her own situation.”

Time ran out on Jan. 26, 2006. One life ended. Many lives revitalized due to that one life.

For Edwards, the last conversation with Karstens on Jan. 23 was typical.

“She said she would call on Thursday afternoon when she got home from the hospital to talk about scheduling,” says Edwards. “We had a funny, laughing conversation. She didn’t sound sick at all.”

It fell to Edwards to call Karstens’ co-workers with the news.

“They were the hardest calls I’ve ever made,” she says.

Talitha Michelle Karstens was brave in the face of pain and death. She sought to get the most out of her brief life. And for her that meant giving the best health care she could to each patient who crossed her path.

PAULA SYPTAK PRICE is a San Antonio-based freelance writer.

Talitha Michelle Karstens, R.N.

- **Position:** Registered nurse
- **Company:** InGenesis Medical Staffing
- **Education:** Registered Nursing degree from Madison (Ky.) Community College; graduated valedictorian for class of 2000.
- **Age at passing:** 36