

## Patient Perspective: Donna Neal

**M**y name is Donna Neal, and I have rheumatoid arthritis. A health descriptive that not only sounds scary and intimidating, but also one that I was not ready to hear at the age of 51.

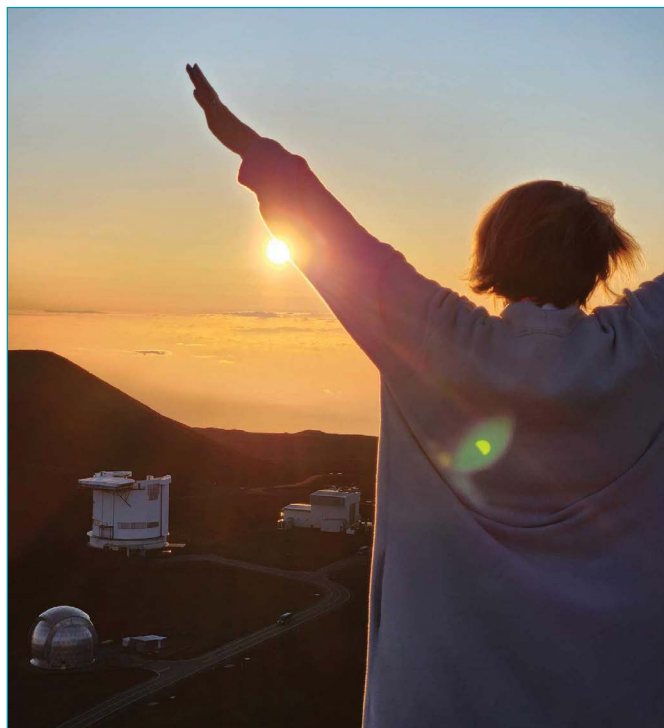
I am positive that my story would be very different if I had not had a healthcare provider who recognized the value of a collaborative approach when dealing with a patient's situation and care. Mine was as simple, and to me as benign, as a swollen finger. At the time of diagnosis, I was an accident-prone mother of two very active teenagers, and I saw my swollen finger as an annoyance. I figured that at some point I had jammed and broken it, so after a few months, it probably was a good time to get it taken care of, as I was unable to close my hand. My general practitioner (GP) looked at it and immediately determined that it was not broken but inflamed. Off I was sent for bloodwork, and I never gave it a second thought.

In the days that followed, I received a call from my GP's office saying my results were in, and I was being referred to an arthritis clinic, The Arthritis Program (TAP), for an assessment the following week. My journey to remission began on that day when Dr. Carter Thorne revealed that my rheumatoid markers were extremely high and outlined the plan for how I was going to take my life back.

Being a part of the TAP program allows access to a resource-rich environment. Their holistic approach tended to not only meet my emotional needs, but all the firsts that were about to come. It wasn't only about me, but the importance of what this meant to my husband and family. We were now a team.

Feeling like I had to take back a piece that I felt I had lost control of, I attended TAP's Inflammatory Workshop, which was a game changer. I was presented with knowledge and resources such as pharmacists, physiotherapists and mental health specialists who would help guide me through my journey, in addition to providing my family with the understanding of what I was facing and the tools to help me succeed.

It was a long road but after six years, in June of 2022, I got the news I was fighting for. You are in remission. I am not naïve to think this is forever; however, I have the tools, the medical team and the confidence to conquer whatever I am faced with to get back on track.



Donna Neal at the top of Mauna Kea volcano in Hawaii. She says of her expedition: "I felt this symbolized my journey to remission. There were some very hard days but my fight allowed me to witness such beauty on my own terms."

When asked how I would define interprofessional care, I look at my path to remission for the answer:

1. A collaborative physician network
2. Patient knowledge and literature in a form the patient can understand
3. Patient support for all phases of the journey
4. Empathy. Life altering news doesn't always "sink in" the first time it's heard. Deliver information with kindness and patience in order to create that safe space where a patient can ask the questions that they fear the most and/or be given time to regain composure after a moment of weakness.

*Donna Neal, Patient Advocate  
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