

# The Star-Ledger

## **When cancer returned, the whole town showed up on this N.J. woman's doorstep**

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When Cindy Kraus saw a crowd outside her home Sunday, she worried that she wouldn't be able to host them all for brunch.

She heard fire truck sirens. Had her husband left something on the stove?

A police Humvee pulled up. A bomb threat, she thought. Why wasn't everyone moving out of the way?

Then she saw Santa Claus, and it all clicked.

Dozens of people and officials gathered in Garwood over the weekend to give Kraus, 59, a free trip to go anywhere in the world.

"You've endured some tough times, now it's time to relax," Santa said. "Please accept this vacation and enjoy to the max."

Kraus has had some rough years.

After her family emigrated from Italy, her mother died of breast cancer. So did three of her aunts, and lung cancer took her dad.

Kraus was diagnosed with breast cancer in the 1990s. A partial mastectomy, radiation and a full mastectomy followed. In May, more bad news: The cancer was back, stage three. None of her relatives had ever survived cancer's return.

"I'm hoping to break that mold," she told NJ Advance Media Tuesday, while driving to St. Barnabas Medical Center for another round of radiation.

Over the years, Kraus has fundraised for the American Cancer Society and volunteered with the Mama Mare Breast Cancer Foundation, the Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that organized Sunday's event.

That group gives away trips every year, and Mama Mare's founder reached out to Kraus' son a few weeks ago about surprising his mom.

Nick Kraus, 35, was in. He told his parents that his girlfriend needed to be with her family Christmas day, and asked if they could celebrate early. Maybe they should all be home for brunch on Sunday?

His parents asked if they could invite other relatives too.

“Perfect,” Nick Kraus responded. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Around 11:30 a.m. neighbors, friends and Mayor Sara Todisco marched up the sidewalk. Fire Chief Allan Tweedle led two engines and a ladder truck from the station, while two patrol SUVs and a Humvee came with Police Chief James Wright.

The parade was especially meaningful for Wright, whose 13-year-old son recently finished treatment for Hodgkin’s lymphoma. (They’re now awaiting final scans, he said.)

Inside the house, Cindy Kraus was holding a glass of orange juice when the doorbell rang. She heard three knocks, then another four.

Kraus opened the door. She took a step back and put a hand to her chest.

“What are all these people doing here?” she said, as kids broke into “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.”

Kraus handed the glass to her husband, Ray Kraus, 58. They met in high school while working at a Clark deli, and married when he was still a teenager.

After a few songs, the founder of Mama Mare, Krista Kasper, arrived in one of the fire trucks. Kasper named her nonprofit after her mom, who also died of breast cancer.

“I’ve never seen a town show up like this,” Kasper said later.

Out of the same truck stepped Dale Gregorin, the man dressed as Santa. Gregorin lost his daughter to cancer several years ago, and he and his wife help raise money for these trips.

As the crowd quieted down, Gregorin pulled hats and luggage out of a bag, and then read an adaption of the famous poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas.”

Kraus’ family had grabbed her a coat because she was shaking, but she wasn’t cold. She realized she and her husband would get a full week away with a hotel room, plane tickets and spending money all covered. They’ll choose the location.

She’d always wanted to go to Australia. She’d heard kangaroos ran rampant, and the scenery looked beautiful in episodes of “The Bold and the Beautiful.” Or Alaska. Her husband had always wanted to take an Alaskan cruise.

First, she needs to finish radiation. She goes for her last treatment in January.

She also has work to do for her own organization, Breast and Ovarian Cancer Awareness, that she founded with her family in August. They've already started giving away money to patients, including gift cards earlier this year to a woman who couldn't afford presents for her kids.

But if Kraus gets the all-clear from her doctors, a trip could work this summer. Maybe in June.

Gregorin finished the poem.

"Merry Christmas!" he said, and the crowd erupted.