

Rome Realtor says she measures her cancer journey by the celebrations she enjoys

Debbie Hayes is featured in the Harbin Clinic Cancer Center's Faces of Hope Gallery

ROME, GA., July 15, 2026 – Debbie Hayes doesn't count the years since she was first diagnosed with colorectal cancer. She counts Christmases, birthday parties, Independence Days and the first days of school, savoring each with gratitude.

"When I was diagnosed, my granddaughter was two. Now she's nine," the consummate optimist said. "I'm just so thankful."

Hayes is among 20 cancer warriors whose stories and portraits are featured in the Faces of Hope gallery at the Harbin Clinic Cancer Center.

Hayes had already battled and survived breast cancer when she began experiencing lower back pain and began finding eating difficult. A series of medical appointments and tests led to her diagnosis. Then, her already-weakened state landed her in the hospital for six weeks. She didn't have the strength to walk. This second round of cancer was robbing her of her normally vivacious approach to life.

"My cell phone felt like it weighed 100 pounds," she said. "I wasn't thriving."

Knowing her to be a fighter, Hayes' family and her care team encouraged her to push on, and she did.

Soon, Hayes was gaining weight and walking again. Armed with regained determination and the support of friends, family and her Cancer Center team, Hayes began to make progress.

"All the glory goes to God, but He used some mighty, mighty people to help me. I love, love them," Hayes said. "The encouragement I got from my doctors and the Cancer Center staff gave me the energy and motivation to fight. And the whole way, God held me up and said, 'Come on.'"

Hayes said she chose to receive care at the Cancer Center.

"I knew that I would get the very best care with the team here in Rome," she said. "I love every nurse, every aide, every technician, every doctor at the Cancer Center."

She has nothing but praise for her radiation oncologist, Dr. Matt Mumber, her surgeon, Dr. Clarence "Mac" McKemie and her oncologist, Dr. Dilwar Kahn.

"If Dr. Kahn was not the person that he is, I don't know what I would have done," Hayes said. "He truly, truly cares about his patients. He is the best of the best of the best."

McKemie's care extended far beyond the bedside, she said, encouraging her family to cheer her on.

"He told them, 'Every single day they make advances and learn something new in cancer research. Don't let her give up.'" Hayes said.

As continued treatment, Hayes showed her appreciation — and her characteristic love for life. She decided she would share a smile with her caregivers and prompt smiles in return when she came in for appointments.

“You can cry, but you might as well laugh,” Hayes said. “I would come in with a purple wig one day or a bright red, Ronald McDonald wig the next. Whatever you’re going through, you’ve got to smile and laugh.”

Today, Hayes is a busy realtor, mother and grandmother who makes it her mission to live a life of gratitude, whether serving her real estate clients, volunteering with a local soup kitchen and food pantry, or celebrating holidays, birthdays and milestones with friends and family.

“Truly, I can say every day is a gift. I get up every day saying, ‘Thank you. Thank you for another day,’” she said. “Almost everything is a choice. You can choose to get mad about it, or you can choose to do something about it.”

About Atrium Health Floyd

The [Atrium Health Floyd](#) family of health care services is a leading medical provider and economic force in northwest Georgia and northeast Alabama. Atrium Health Floyd is part of Charlotte, North Carolina based [Advocate Health](#), the third-largest nonprofit health system in the United States. Atrium Health Floyd strategically combined with Harbin Clinic in 2024 and employs more than 5,200 teammates who provide care in over 40 medical specialties at four facilities: Atrium Health Floyd Medical Center, a 361-bed full-service, acute care hospital and regional referral center in Rome, Georgia; Atrium Health Floyd Polk Medical Center in Cedartown, Georgia; Atrium Health Floyd Cherokee Medical Center in Centre, Alabama; and Atrium Health Floyd Medical Center Behavioral Health, also in Rome. Committed to redefining care for all, Atrium Health Floyd and Harbin Clinic provide primary care, specialty care and urgent care throughout northwest Georgia and northeast Alabama. Atrium Health Floyd also operates a stand-alone emergency department in Chattooga County, the first such facility to be built from the ground-up in Georgia.

About Advocate Health

[Advocate Health](#) is the third-largest nonprofit, integrated health system in the United States, created from the combination of Advocate Aurora Health and Atrium Health. Providing care under the names [Advocate Health Care](#) in Illinois; [Atrium Health](#) in the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama; and [Aurora Health Care](#) in Wisconsin, Advocate Health is a national leader in clinical innovation, health outcomes, consumer experience and value-based care. Headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, Advocate Health services nearly 6 million patients and is engaged in hundreds of clinical trials and research studies, with [Wake Forest University School of Medicine](#) serving as the academic core of the enterprise. Advocate Health is nationally recognized for its expertise in heart and vascular, neurosciences, oncology, pediatrics and rehabilitation, as well as organ transplants, burn treatments and specialized musculoskeletal programs. Advocate Health employs more than 160,000 teammates across 69 hospitals and over 1,000 care locations, and offers one of the nation’s largest graduate medical education programs with over 2,000 residents and fellows across more than 200 programs. Committed to redefining care for all, Advocate Health provides more than \$6 billion in annual community benefits.

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