



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

MEDICAL CENTER

James M. Slater, MD
Proton Treatment & Research Center

How Marisabel Nicoletti found a new lease on life through proton therapy *By James Ponder*

Three years ago, Marisabel Nicoletti's doctor asked a very startling question: "Do you know you have a brain tumor behind your left eye?" The doctor went on to explain that Ms. Nicoletti had a meningioma in the membranous layers surrounding her brain.

"It was like the end of the world," she recalls. "I was in shock for almost a month, refusing to talk to anybody."

Several weeks later, as Ms. Nicoletti and Norberto, her husband, were coming home from a walk, they ran into an Adventist neighbor who expressed concern and inquired how Ms. Nicoletti was doing. "Slowly, I was able to cry and open up," she recalls. "She asked if we could pray together."

Armed with the support of her family and her neighbor, Ms. Nicoletti launched a relentless search for the best treatment option. With two adorable grandkids, a wonderful daughter and son-in-law, a loving husband, large family and many friends, she had plenty of reasons

to live. She made up her mind to do whatever it takes to get the help she needed.

"When a neurosurgeon told me I wouldn't be able to find help for my condition anywhere in Kansas, I resolved to search the whole U.S.A. for treatment," she says. "I refused to give up."

She eventually narrowed her search to four prominent institutions — the Mayo Clinic, UCLA, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and Johns Hopkins.

"The four," she reasoned, "rank among the finest health centers on earth; surely one of them will be able to halt the growth of the tumor and save my vision." She was soon to be disappointed.

"They all offered me the same three choices," she says. "I could either do nothing and lose my vision, have a craniotomy with a 50/50 chance of success and maybe lose my vision, or undergo normal radiation with the same luck."

Ms. Nicoletti didn't like any of those options. "I was involved in a lot of things that use my eyes," she says. "I didn't want to lose my vision."

Disappointed yet undeterred, she intensified her quest for a better alternative. "We kept searching on the Internet and found the Loma Linda website, Protons.com."

Determined to investigate every possibility, she and Norberto traveled to California to consult with Lilia Loredo, M.D., a radiation oncologist at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

"Since the first moment I arrived here," Ms. Nicoletti shares, "Dr. Loredo had a different opinion. She said proton could be an option."

Physicians and scientists at the James M. Slater, MD, Proton Treatment & Research Center have successfully treated more than 17,000 patients with proton beams in the last 20 years. Many of those individuals had previously been told their condition was fatal and untreatable; yet today, 10 or 15 years later, they're living active, healthy lives and singing the praises of protons.

Dr. Loredo explained that while the majority of proton patients



Norberto and Marisabel Nicoletti

Ms. Nicoletti was treated in 2011 for a meningioma brain tumor at the James M. Slater, MD Proton Treatment & Research Center where physicians targeted the tumor with incredible precision.

are in treatment for prostate or lung cancer, about 1.5 percent come to Loma Linda with brain tumors. She also said ongoing clinical trials are finding solid applications for proton treatment of breast cancer and other diseases.

Ms. Nicoletti returned to Kansas almost convinced that God was leading her to Loma Linda. One thing still bothered her, however: if proton therapy really were as harmless and effective as Dr. Loredo claimed, how come none of the other institutions suggested it?

The answer arrived from an unexpected source when a radiation oncologist at one of the four institutions she initially consulted bravely disclosed that her organization was far behind Loma Linda in proton expertise.

"She advised me to go where the pioneers are," Ms. Nicoletti remembers. "I took that as confirmation that I was supposed to go to Loma Linda. As soon as we left the office, I called Dr. Loredo and said 'Green light!'"

When Ms. Nicoletti arrived for treatment, physicians at Loma Linda University Medical Center explained that unlike conventional radiation therapy, which can damage surrounding healthy tissues, proton treatment is delivered with exacting precision. With protons, physicians can target the tumor and leave surrounding

organs and tissues with minimal exposure. As a result, most patients experience minimal side effects, if any.

Unbeknown to Ms. Nicoletti, proton researchers at Loma Linda University Medical Center are among the world's leading authorities in understanding and treating meningiomas. An August 2012 article in the *International Journal of Radiation Oncology, Biology, Physics* presented the findings of a study conducted at Loma Linda on the type of tumor Ms. Nicoletti had.

Principal author Jerry D. Slater, M.D., and a team of scientists — one of whom was Dr. Loredo — concluded that "fractionated proton radiotherapy for grade 1 cavernous sinus meningiomas achieves excellent control rates with minimal toxicities, regardless of surgical intervention or use of histologic diagnosis. Disease control for large lesions can be achieved by primary fractionated proton therapy." In other words, the treatment is effective against meningiomas.

Her treatment began June 6, 2011. A mere month and 13 days later, it was over. The Nicoletti's returned to Lenexa hoping and praying the meningioma had been killed.

At her first postprocedure checkup six months later, Ms. Nicoletti received good news from Dr. Loredo — the tumor was inactive. At her next evaluation, a full year after treatment, the results were the same; everything was still looking good. In August of 2013, the couple returned to Loma Linda for her two-year checkup.

Once again, the prognosis could not have been better.

"We are doing OK!" Ms. Nicoletti beams. "Everything is stable. The tumor is the same size, and there are no side effects on my pituitary. I am very happy to hear that."

To celebrate, Mr. and Mrs. Nicoletti are taking their two grandkids — 6 ½-year-old Isabella and 1-year-old Alex — to Orlando for some family time at Disney World. When they return, Ms. Nicoletti has lots of things to do. There are bridge parties to host, rounds of tennis to play, toy stores to scour for Isabella and Alex ... The only thing she's not likely to do is let a brain tumor slow her down.

Today, more than five years after her ordeal began, Ms. Nicoletti is thankful to God for guiding her to Loma Linda University Medical Center. "Proton treatment at Loma Linda was a solution for my problem," she reflects.

It was a portal to new understanding. "I learned a lot in Loma Linda," she adds. "We are Catholics, and we were taught that you have to pray in church or in a quiet place. But at Loma Linda, I learned to talk to God from the heart at any place.

"Since the first day at Loma Linda," she concludes, "I felt I was in a special and caring environment. The people there were very supportive all the time. When I walk in there, I can breathe deeply. I trust the doctors. I'm very grateful for Loma Linda."

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