An era ended on December 31 with the retirement of Catherine Lyons, RN, MS, Vice President of Patient Services and Chief Nursing Officer at Smilow Cancer Hospital. She was the last remaining member of the trio generally credited with launching Smilow into a nationally-renowned cancer hospital, the other two being Thomas Lynch, Jr., MD, Smilow’s inaugural Physician-in-Chief, and Abe Lopman, the first Executive Director.

“Cathy is an extraordinary leader who has taught us the meaning of world-class, patient- and family-centered care. Her impact on the culture in Smilow is immeasurable,” said Charles Fuchs, MD, MPH, Physician-in-Chief of Smilow.

She almost didn’t come. When a recruiter called in 2009 about the top nursing job at a brand-new cancer hospital in New Haven, she wasn’t interested. She liked her job as associate director of clinical services and nursing at the James P. Wilmot Cancer Center at the University of Rochester. Born in Buffalo, she had spent the first 25 years of her oncology career in that city at the Roswell Park Cancer Center before moving on to a medical center in Maryland and the National Cancer Institute (NCI). She was happy to be back in western New York, near her family, and in a prestigious job.

The recruiter persuaded her to at least meet with Dr. Lynch and Mr. Lopman. “They articulated a vision that was pretty compelling,” said Ms. Lyons, “about wanting to build a world-class cancer facility and a program that would be a destination for patients and a leader in cancer research. We also hit it off personally. I remember telling somebody that these were the kind of guys you could have a beer with and immediately felt like best friends because we thought so much alike.”

Nevertheless, she said no. Nevertheless, Dr. Lynch and Mr. Lopman kept asking her to come back and talk, just once more. She reluctantly agreed. “The two of them had so much energy around what they wanted to create here that eventually I wanted to be a part of it,” explained Ms. Lyons, who finally arrived at Smilow in 2010.

To create the cancer hospital they envisioned, the three worked with their staff to change the existing culture. They established new models of medical practice and patient care. Big changes always meet resistance. For the first six months, Ms. Lyons kept her belongings packed because she wasn’t sure the vision would survive.

“Cathy is a spectacular clinician—a nurses’ nurse who practices at the top of her craft,” said Dr. Lynch. “That was essential for her to have the credibility of the nursing staff to set the culture that she knew Smilow needed to succeed.”

They pushed for staffing at what they considered appropriate levels for the cancer hospital they intended to build and drew their aspirational standards from NCI-designated cancer centers such as Memorial Sloan Kettering and MD Anderson. The nursing staff grew sharply. The number of advanced practice providers (APPs), for instance, went from 12 to 60.
They also changed how care was delivered in the outpatient areas, which Ms. Lyons calls “the lifeblood of any cancer program” because that’s where most patients receive their treatment, not in hospital rooms. “Our challenge was to create an environment that was not only safer and more efficient, but also more compassionate.”

The cultural change that grew out of all this is what makes Ms. Lyons most proud. Asked to describe it, she said, “A relentless pursuit of excellence and compassionate care. On the day that patients come for their physician visit, or surgery, or radiation, or chemotherapy, we want them to feel like they are the most important thing to us. To do that, everybody has to be aligned and focused and really give everything of themselves. It takes a lot of courage and commitment to be in oncology. It’s almost like a vocation, not just a job.”

The key was hiring staff who felt that way. Ms. Lyons looked for people drawn to the field because of a personal story. Perhaps a beloved grandfather had died of cancer, or maybe a mother’s cancer nurse had inspired the person to enter nursing school. Ms. Lyons’s story starts with an aunt who died young from breast cancer, leaving five children. Like most families back then, no one talked about the diagnosis, so the death shocked Ms. Lyons and made her want to do something that could help families experience cancer differently. She became an oncology nurse in 1975 and has never left the field.

“I always tell our nurses, our patients have just been given a devastating diagnosis, and you have an opportunity to make that an easier process,” she said. “No one ever forgets the oncology nurses who took care of them. I validated that almost 40 years later, because I am a cancer survivor myself.” She was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago and was successfully treated at Smilow.

Tracy Carafeno, RN, MS, Clinical Program Director, Smilow Inpatient Operations, was at Yale New Haven when Ms. Lyons arrived. “I think Cathy was the perfect person to take this nursing leadership role as Smilow opened,” she said. “Cathy always says, ‘Put the patient first and you’ll always be OK.’ That’s been huge to get us where we are. She sets very high standards, but she provides the support to make that happen.”

Ms. Lyons championed nurses, added Ms. Carafeno, starting with staffing levels, and she also built extensive programs to give nurses opportunities for continuing education and advancement.

“Cathy will leave a legacy that will, for many years, be hard to match. She redifined care to the cancer patient and established a level of respect for oncology nursing that I had not seen anywhere else,” Mr. Lopman said.

In 2014, just four years after Ms. Lyons arrived, the American Nurses Credentialing Center conferred Magnet status on Yale New Haven Health—including Smilow, signifying the outstanding nursing care. Dr. Lynch left for another career opportunity in 2015, Mr. Lopman retired in October 2018. Now, after nearly 45 years in oncology, Ms. Lyons is going home to Buffalo to be near family again.

“It is rare that we get to thank our mentors who did so much to make us the people and leaders that we become. Cathy and Abe’s retirement gives me a chance to do that. At the end of our careers, I think we will all look back on this unique time at Yale and be very proud. Smilow is an exceptional place and is well positioned to continue to grow as one of America’s finest cancer hospitals,” Dr. Lynch said.

“Our new leaders Charlie Fuchs and Lori Pickens, are the best,” Cathy said. “They honor the work that’s been done here in the last 10 years and they know it’s important to preserve that culture. I have every confidence that they will move this organization forward to even better things.”