

THE STARK REPORT PHYLLIS STARK phyllis.stark@billboard.com

Despite Life-Changing Medical Ordeal, WSLC's Jaymes Keeps Looking Ahead



Once a prominent figure at radio industry events and conventions, **Robynn Jaymes** has been largely off the radar in recent years while battling a serious illness and struggling to stay afloat amid mounting medical bills.

While not cured of the chronic pancreatitis that put her in the hospital for 40 days in late 2011 and nearly claimed her life, Jaymes has been bravely fighting back. Even amid additional medical and personal setbacks, the midday host at Roanoke, Va.'s **WSLC** (Star Country) has emerged from the ordeal with a profound appreciation for what life now brings her way. "I thought I was grateful before," she says, "but I can tell you that I have a whole bigger sense of gratitude now than ever before."

Jaymes has spent her whole 30-year career in country radio, beginning at **WYYD** Roanoke, where she rose through the ranks to PD before moving to crosstown rival WSLC for mornings in 2001. Her health was good until four-and-a-half years ago, when she came down with what she first thought was just the flu — that is, until she began vomiting blood.

"I was in shock by the time they took me to the emergency room," she recalls. "I was out of it, so I just heard the doctor say, 'You have pancreatitis,' which meant nothing to me at that time. My only reference was **Patrick Swayze**, who had pancreatic cancer. So I knew it was some serious stuff, whatever it was. They admitted me to the hospital right away, and I don't even remember the first week I was [there]."

By then, her organ had gone into a state called a pancreatic flare-up, which Jaymes says causes it to "auto-digest itself, which is really creepy. It sounds like a bad horror movie." Her other vital organs also became inflamed and began to shut down. During those early days in intensive care, she says hospital staff "asked me for my end-of-life choices ... I remember thinking, 'This is how it ends?'"

She was soon transferred to a hospital in Charlottesville, Va., that was equipped with a pancreas division and was put on a feeding tube. "You have to just completely rest your pancreas," she explains. "It can't work at all. I couldn't even smell food, because if you smell food, you start to salivate, and that makes your pancreas want to start working."

She was off the air from the Wheeler Broadcasting-owned station for nearly a year and faced five surgeries during that time. "When they first got it under control in Charlottesville, they told me [I'd be out] two to three months, and that sounded crazy to me. I thought, 'Oh, I'll be back to work before then.' But no, it was 10 months before I came back. It was like dealing with the flu every day. You're nauseous and you have pain ... [from] internal swelling. I just really had no idea I could hurt that bad on the inside. The nausea's the really hard part to deal with. I can push through the pain, but the nausea's really challenging, and I still have that."

When she returned, station president/GM **Leonard Wheeler** offered her the less taxing midday shift, and she gratefully accepted. But things haven't been easy. Three years ago she lost her mother to cancer. "She was ... a huge encouragement to me to keep going on those days when I thought I couldn't," says Jaymes. "I try to carry her tremendous courage and bravery with me every day."

Then in fall 2015 she developed a stomach condition called gastroparesis

as a result of being treated with antibiotics for bronchitis. I had had her off the air for another month until her return early in 2016.

In addition to the physical burden, the whole ordeal has taken a financial toll. Despite having good insurance through her employer, the combination of not working and her portion of what she calls the "monster" medical bills eventually caused Jaymes to lose everything. "The first bill I got when I got out of the hospital was in excess of \$100,000," she says. "I lost my house. I lost my savings. I live in the basement of a friend's house now. Kind of humbling at this point in my life and career, you know? It's not where I thought I'd be."

As a radio broadcaster, Jaymes has been involved with scores of fundraisers, but was humbled when her community came together to hold one for her.

While she was grateful, she admits, "It starts a depression."

After returning to the airwaves, she began sharing her difficult journey with her listeners. She says, "I've tried to be very transparent about it. The listeners have been just simply amazing. I can't get over the community here." Fans now often stop her when they see her around town and tell her they're praying for her.

Although she continues to regain strength, Jaymes will deal with pancreatitis for the rest of her life, and the food restrictions have put a damper on socializing. "Think about how social food is," she says, noting that her dietary restrictions have "changed things completely. If [friends] say, 'Come over for dinner,' I have to say, 'I can only eat this, this and this.' Really not big options."

"I can eat cardboard," she jokes of her dietician-regulated intake. Off the menu are red meat, red sauces, pizza and all spices. She must also set alerts on her phone to remind herself to take all of her medications.

While she's not yet ready to declare herself a "comeback kid," jokes Jaymes, "I'm in training for it every day." Meanwhile, she's enjoying a new outlook on life. "Each day, I'm excited to wake up and continue to do what I love, and I feel blessed."

Topping her gratitude list are Wheeler, Star Country PD/morning man **Brett Sharp**, morning co-host **Boomer** and the rest of the team who covered for her, even combining morning drive and her midday slot into one long shift to fill the gap during her absences. "It's a huge deal, and they're very supportive," she says.

These days, says Jaymes, "I appreciate crazy things [like] just walking out the front door [and seeing the sun.] On the cloudy days, I look for the colors. I get to do so much, and I've had the opportunity to do so much in my life, with my career, that I'm just super thankful for everything that's come my way."

She also has a newfound sense of empathy. "I can relate so quickly to people now that are going through a struggle," she says. "I want to be an encouragement and try to say something [to] let them know [to] keep going. On the dark days, you really do need it. I did." On her show and Web page, she has added a feature called "Warm and Fuzzy," in which she shares a daily inspirational story.

While she says the whole experience still feels "surreal" and "like someone else's story," Jaymes has managed to hold on to her sanity, her faith and her positivity.

"After all I've been through," she says. "I still feel blessed." ●



JAYMES