When the textile mills near her hometown of Summerville, Georgia, closed, Sabrina Gilreath was out of a job—but she wasn't out of ideas. The young mother went back to school, earned a certified nurse assistant license, and ventured into a whole new career in health care. Today that same fortitude and willingness to pursue new options is helping Mrs. Gilreath face a more daunting challenge: surviving cancer.

Mrs. Gilreath was just 17 when she began working in the textile mills alongside her mother and sister. Eleven years later, when the mills had shut down or moved offshore, the trio earned their licenses together and started new jobs at a local nursing home, with Mrs. Gilreath working the night shift.

Six months into her new job, Mrs. Gilreath started feeling ill. Initially, she shrugged it off, thinking she probably had the flu. Three weeks passed, and her cough became progressively worse. Then other ominous symptoms began to assert themselves, including temperatures of 102-103 degrees, night sweats, chills and extreme fatigue.

“I was the type of person who never went to the doctor for anything,” she says. “My dad passed away with lung cancer when I was 18, and he was also the type of person who didn’t see the doctor. When he was 34, he finally had symptoms he couldn’t fight off and went to the emergency room. He was admitted to the hospital, diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and given three months to live. I guess that news and his young age made me nervous about seeing doctors. I decided that if I ever developed a terminal illness, I didn’t want to know but would rather tough it out until I passed.”

But Mrs. Gilreath’s illness advanced to the point where she became short of breath and experienced a heavy feeling so intense “that it felt like someone was sitting on my chest,” she says. She finally went to the emergency room. “I thought I probably had pneumonia,” she says. “Unlike my dad, I never smoked cigarettes, so I didn’t think I could possibly have cancer. But after giving me a chest X ray and CT scan, the ER doctor came into my room and told me that I had lung cancer. I was devastated. I wondered how I could have lung cancer when I’ve never smoked. But I learned that I had a different kind of lung cancer called Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

Mrs. Gilreath’s medical treatment began right away with intensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Nearly five years later, chemotherapy was unable to shrink her tumor further, and she was sent to Emory Medical Center in Atlanta for a bone-marrow transplant. But by then, Mrs. Gilreath was too weak to undergo the procedure, and her doctors suggested that she come to the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center to participate in a first-of-its-kind clinical trial under the care of Senior Scientist Andres Forero, M.D. “Five years of treatment had left me very tired,” she says. “I pretty much spent the fifth year of my treatments lying on the couch, not doing anything. I was so thin and weak that looked like I was on hospice care.”

Today, Mrs. Gilreath is very glad she mustered the strength to participate in the UAB trial because she was introduced to SGN-35, the drug that she says has worked wonders on her health and quality of life.

“I was told that I made history because I was the first patient in the United States to try SGN-35,” she says. Early in the trial, Mrs. Gilreath noticed her energy level had increased tremendously. “I felt as though nothing was wrong with me at all,” she marvels. “I experienced minor bone pain throughout the treatment, and I became lactose-intolerant, but that was a very small price to pay for feeling great and alive again.”

Mrs. Gilreath’s forward progress continued for a year; then she contracted the flu and experienced a minor setback. Some of her medications also interacted in negative ways. “I experienced minor swelling in some lymph nodes and was taken off the trial for about three months,” she says. “I was put on a chemotherapy drug called Gemzar. When everything got back to normal, I was able to go back on the trial but with a slight increase in SGN-35 dosage.”

Mrs. Gilreath participated in the study for another year without any side effects, except for minor bone pain. Then a few months ago, a lymph node under her left arm, close to the original tumor, began to swell. She was put on two strong antibiotics, but the swelling didn’t subside, so she was taken off the SGN-35 trial and received three and a half weeks of radiation.

This treatment not only diminished the swelling but also reduced the size of the tumor in Mrs. Gilreath's lung. "I went back for a CT scan, and the doctor didn't believe the swelling was a tumor—just a really bad infection that wouldn't go away," she says. "The radiation took care of it."

The reduced swelling gave Mrs. Gilreath a grateful break from doctors and tests. "Getting to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas at home is the best gift I could have received," she says.

Returning to the SGN-35 trial is Mrs. Gilreath's greatest hope. "I went for more than a year without having any problems," she says. "The drug not only extends my life, but it might actually become a cure for me or for others. I'm hoping and praying that they let me go back on it." Mrs. Gilreath, now 34, adds that the treatment has helped her regain a more active, involved lifestyle; she enjoys shopping and cooking for her family, which includes her husband, Garry, and her 17-year-old son, Dakota.

Mrs. Gilreath's experience with UAB has been great, she says. "It has been the best hospital. I just wish I could have gotten a referral five years ago, when I first got sick." She also has advice for patients who may have the opportunity to participate in a clinical trial.

"Don't be scared," she says. "It could be the best thing that ever happened to you— you might save your life, and you might save another's life. I was the first one in the U.S. to try that SGN-35 trial, and within seven to eight treatments, I was up walking around like a normal

human being. I was going all around the hospital talking to people as a witness, encouraging them to do this trial. Some did, and now there are 14 others participating. SGN-35 was my last choice, and it was left in God’s hands. But I believe that God put doctors here for a reason—and trials, too—so I don’t regret any of it.”