Lives Embraced Through Memories

Heart of Oncology Nursing
Barb Henry, APRN-BC, MSN—Associate Editor

The Window Watcher
Mary Murphy, RN, MS, AOCN®, ACHPN

As an oncology clinical nurse specialist, I have the opportunity to meet patients in a variety of unique settings, including hospitals, extended care facilities, homes, apartments, and our inpatient hospice unit.

*Miracles are unexpected joys, springing coincidences, unexplainable experiences, and astonishing beauties. Absolutely anything that happens in the course of my day, except that at this moment, I'm able to recognize its special value.*

This quote from Knowlton (1990, “October 7”) best describes the gifts and lessons we receive from our patients each day. It is in the setting of a patient’s home that I have the greatest privilege—seeing patients in their own special life. It was in this unique setting that I met Jillian.

Jillian was a 32-year-old patient with end-stage cervical cancer who had been treated surgically and had an ileoconduit and colostomy. Jillian no longer responded to multiple chemotherapy regimens and was experiencing increased abdominal pain from extensive pelvic and spinal metastasis, bilateral leg edema, and a draining vaginal fistula. Jillian resided in a housing project. Her former job was listed as “street walker” or, in other words, a prostitute.

I was overwhelmed by three things when I first met Jillian: the starkness of her apartment, the overwhelming odor of Jillian’s extensive draining pelvic wound, and, most strikingly, Jillian’s violet blue eyes and magnificent smile which dominated her ever so cachetic face. I also was intrigued by the large, unshaded, undraped window that dominated the room and asked her if the vastness and light disturbed her. Jillian said, “The window is my life! Through that window, I see all of the street, the people, and feel the world around me and manage to survive.”

Jillian introduced me to the window and its characters. Each person on the street had a name; she knew their routine, what they wore, and where they went. She knew when they got new suits or coats. She knew all the small animals, squirrels (like one she named Nutterbutter), the blue jay, robins, and pigeons. She knew the trees, their leaves, and how they changed. From books borrowed, she became a wizard of the environment. She knew all the businesses in the area and who ran them. Her family was all around her.

It was at this time that I began to call her “the window watcher,” and soon started bringing the world to her: pine cones, leaves, bird feathers, small stones, cups of snow, and even a Mason jar filled with rainwater from the street. At each visit, we talked of life and what it meant to each of us. Filled with pain, but ever so eager to talk, Jillian struggled to remain at the window until it was time to leave. Jillian gave me a gift that can not be purchased in any store nor wrapped in a package. She gave me the gift of “presence in the moment.”

Thank goodness I have walked in circles long enough to wear the soles of my shoes so that the diamonds on which I stand can now get my attention (Knowlton, 1990, “October 7”).

It really is what is right next door that matters. Thank you, Jillian.

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Reference

The window watcher watches her wonder world below
The world world from which she forever waits
Her horizontal throne the deadbeated near a small window pane.

She views her kingdom below with new eyes
Former walker of the streets she sees her customers with intrigue
Her past view of the world has been through eyeglasses of deceit.

Her kingdom spans city blocks and miles of seasonal delights
Figures moving, working and whispering unheard sounds
She sees them now as she has not before.

Seasons become her view, season viewing consumes her life
Winter winds lick the panes, snowflakes dance to a Christmas tune
Spring flowers, and green grass and signs of life.

Summer sounds, laughter, children biking, hot dog carts, crisp flags snapping to a breeze
Fall leaves rustle, pumpkins about, trick or treaters and candy-filled bags
And winter comes back around and comes back around.

The window watcher watches no more
The window now empty, a faded vision remains
The window watcher watches though her new window from above.

—Mary Murphy, dedicated to Jillian
The Vest
Marcia Gruber, RN, MSN

Nurses often discuss the importance of treating patients as unique individuals. One of my colleagues does this in a rather distinctive way.

Sabrina Maddox is an RN at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, NY, and is assigned to our chemotherapy satellite office in Amherst, NY. Sabrina has been a registered professional nurse for 17 years and an oncology nurse for five years. Since 2007, Sabrina has worn a vest that displays a variety of colorful pins that patients have given her. Each pin is a gift and symbolizes a life, a personality, and a story.

More than 120 “gifts” are pinned on Sabrina’s vest. As I pointed to a particular pin, Sabrina would tell me the story of the person who gave it to her.

- A butterfly pin given by a patient that Sabrina called Madame Butterfly
- A pin worn by a Navy veteran of the Korean War
- A 35-year employment pin from a woman who worked at Sears
- A pin in the shape of a microphone from a former disc jockey; the call letters of the station are on the pin.
- A silver dream catcher given by a Native American patient
- A pin of the scales of justice given by a lawyer
- Several colorful pins given with love from Russian patients
- Pins collected from all of the Empire State Games
- A pin from the uniform of a World War II veteran who served aboard a U.S. battleship
- A pin of knitting needles given by a patient who did her knitting during all her chemotherapy treatments
- A pin that simply says “Believe”

Sabrina recalled sharing a personal story with a patient about her own father and how he was a championship welterweight boxer. That patient brought Sabrina a pin of pink boxing gloves. Another patient worked at a drug company for more than 30 years. When he retired, he received a pin with a tiny diamond chip on it. When he gave that pin to Sabrina, he said, “I was waiting for the right woman to come along to give this diamond.”

The pins and these stories reveal the history, hope, beliefs, strength, vulnerability, and humor that patients bring with them as they journey through illness and treatment. Each pin is indeed a gift and each of these gifts reveals the very important and special relationship between a patient and a nurse. Sabrina’s vest eventually became too heavy to wear and the nurses asked that it be framed and hung in the reception area where all the patients could see it. One patient, seeing the vest in the frame for the first time, said with tears in her eyes, “My pin on that vest means I will never be forgotten.”

To my nurse colleagues, never doubt how many lives you touch and never underestimate the importance of what you do for patients. But, most importantly, never forget that each of your patients holds a unique place in this world.

Photo courtesy of Sabrina Maddox. Used with permission.

Sabrina Maddox, RN, shows off her vest adorned with pins given to her by patients she has connected with as an oncology nurse.

I Watched My Parents Dance Today
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My Parents’ Dance
Cynthia Vorpahl Purcell, MSN, RN

In the summer of 2008, I visited my parents to lend a hand and be with my mother as she entered the terminal phase of small cell lung cancer. She was extremely weak and barely able to move her legs. My father was determined to preserve my mother’s dignity until her last breath. He would lift her from her wheelchair and transfer her into the bathroom to avoid the need for a bedpan or diapers.

I watched this scene one day. The wheelchair did not fit through the doorway into the bathroom, so they had to “dance” their way from the wheelchair to the toilet. I couldn’t bear the sight and dropped my eyes to the floor. It was then that I saw their feet. My heart wished that their feet were dancing instead of dragging. It was then that I realized they were dancing, and that is when I wrote I Watched My Parents Dance Today.

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