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Web Exclusive: The Voice on the Other End of the Phone

BY DIANNE ERICSON

Finalist essay: CURE's 2009 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing

Throughout this journey, I've encountered many wonderful nursing professionals. There were those in my primary doctor's office who hugged me tightly when we first heard the news. There was a night nurse in the hospital who literally laid hands on me and prayed when I was exhausted, in tears, and in pain, hundreds of miles from home for my second surgery. Each month, there are nurses at the oncology practice who pat my arm and encourage me through every round of chemotherapy.

Each of them, with every comforting word and gentle touch of the hand, has touched my heart. Yet the caregiver who has also touched my spirit is the one I've never met in person.

An oncology nurse by training, she is a registered nurse case manager with our insurance provider. Marianne works in Pennsylvania. I live in North Carolina.

She is the voice on the other end of the phone.

I don't remember exactly when I first "met" Marianne Sacks. I lived in a daze for the first month after the diagnosis. I was in and out of doctors' offices and the hospital, going where, and doing what, I was told. There were several phone calls from Marianne, introducing herself, explaining what a case manager did, offering her services, gently prodding me in her soft-spoken way, to get moving and take charge of my life and my treatment. I'm sorry to say that, at first, she had trouble penetrating my fog.

Our first lengthy conversation took place about six weeks after my D-Day. I had gotten through the colon surgery well and had an appointment to discuss the future liver resection. Unexpectedly, the surgeon said I was not a candidate for surgery. I had done the reading and knew the statistics. All of a sudden, I had no hope—not for the resection, and not for life.

Then, Marianne called. Marianne urged me to get a second opinion, and proposed a major cancer center “in network.” She found a surgeon more than 1,000 miles from my home who routinely did extensive liver resections. This was the doctor who ended up doing my surgery.

But Marianne saved my life. Without her, I would have been directionless. It hadn't even occurred to me to take bold moves. From that point on, Marianne became my unseen friend.

During chemo, we developed a pattern. I would call Marianne on day one while I sat for hours in the treatment room. She learned the details, not just of my medical progress, but of my life. She knew when my parents were visiting to help care for my family. She heard all about my pride in my almost-teenage daughter, and my worries for my husband's stress level. She asked for, and got, our family pictures from holidays and events.

In turn, Marianne would call me just when I needed her, farther into the chemo round, just about the time when I was hitting bottom, and convinced the misery would never end. Each time, she would remind me of my reasons to keep fighting. She helped me cope with the everyday little problems, while my oncologist and I dealt with the “big picture.”

Marianne shared her life with me. Each time she vacationed, I waited patiently for her return. Through her wonderful descriptions of her vacations, I traveled in my mind when my body wasn't up to it;

Eight months after finishing chemo, when a CT scan showed new metastases, Marianne was my first call. She helped me pull myself together and find the words to break the news to family and friends. I knew she shared my distress, but she was able to share her strength and calm with me.

I'd love to meet Marianne Sacks, but I'm not sure I ever will. She is exactly what I need: a friend who clearly cares, who listens when I cry or complain, and I don't have to see the pain and worry I cause in her eyes.

She is my voice on the other end of the phone.

Dianne Ericson did in fact meet Marianne Sacks as they were chosen as finalists for the 2009 Extraordinary Healer Award contest and both were flown to San Antonio with their families to connect in person for the first time. [View pictures from the event here.](#)