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Web Exclusive: A Peaceful Spirit

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

It's difficult to pinpoint one story that captures the peaceful spirit of Nadeen Robinson.

New York City is renowned for its chaotic atmosphere, and on the inpatient oncology unit of New York Presbyterian Columbia University Medical Center, the harried undercurrent is palpable. Nadeen is renowned for her philosophy of caring for the patient and their family holistically through quality of care, safety, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

In the complicated ever-changing world of oncology nursing, where administering toxic medication is a daily occurrence and preventing life-threatening complications and side effects is nothing more than routine, it might be difficult to imagine a more stressful working environment.

Nadeen is always available no matter how or when. One patient, a 21-year-old woman, was newly diagnosed with melanoma that had spread to her liver. She had just given birth to a healthy baby girl. The couple was young and scared, and the patient was in a great deal of pain. This was the first hospital experience in New York for this young family, and they were concerned that, in a large academic center, their care would be impersonal.

Nadeen introduced herself as their primary nurse and dispelled all those notions. Nadeen first addressed the young woman's pain and made her feel comfortable and safe. She then explained the treatment plan and what to expect, checking to make sure that they understood.

Nadeen then called our children's hospital and personally picked up a breast pump for her so she would not be in any additional pain from the sudden weaning of her baby. Nadeen knew that receiving chemotherapy meant the mother would no longer be able to breastfeed her baby. She anticipated her needs and reassured the patient that she would assist her in any way she possibly could.

Upon discharge, this patient and her husband asked me to give a special message

to Nadeen that said, "I will never forget Nadeen; she helped us make it through the worst experience of our lives."

Another story that captures Nadeen's spirit is a 31-year-old student who had recently been diagnosed with lymphoma and was being admitted for his first dose of chemotherapy. Nadeen explained the procedure to this young man and, in a most respectful and professional manner, asked him if prior to admission if anyone had addressed the possibility of him becoming sterile due to the high dose and combination of chemotherapy.

This patient replied that someone had addressed this issue with him and he had an address of a "bank" to send the "donation;" however, he was scared and unsure of the procedure.

Nadeen compassionately explained to him in a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact manner that this was customary for young men on this particular chemotherapy regimen. She called the admitting office for a room to allow for her patient's privacy. Nadeen then took a brown box from the utility room so they could store the sperm in the igloo cooler to spare this young man from any embarrassment he might feel; she assured him to not be ashamed. Later when the patient's mother came to visit, she was so grateful for Nadeen's compassion and professionalism.

She said, "You have helped my son through a most traumatic and emotionally draining experience. This could have been embarrassing; however, it was presented as routine. This made all the difference in the world to my son."

This young man came to visit the unit last Christmas, and Nadeen wondered if he was back for another treatment. He casually responded that he was not here for treatment, but had come back to the hospital to personally deliver a Christmas card for Nadeen.

Another time, during an ordinary weekend on the oncology unit with the usual influx of visitors coming and going, patients and their families crowded the rooms with food, flowers, and fanfare. It seemed as if everyone had a visitor, except Ms. R, a feisty 90-year-old lady.

She had no visitors, so I stopped in to say hello. I asked her how she was doing, and she said to me, "I am doing just fine ... I have my Nurse Nadeen. She is better than any medicine. She really loves me."

Ms. R had finished a cycle of chemo and did not have an appetite for two weeks; she was feeling weak and tired. Sunday morning she had completed her last cycle of chemo and was relieved that she had reached this point. Nadeen checked on her and asked quite casually what her needs were for the day. Ms. R said half-jokingly, "I could really use a Starbucks coffee and carrot muffin." The next time she saw her nurse, she was holding a Starbucks coffee and carrot muffin! With her peaceful aura and giving spirit she made her patient feel loved!

Nadeen regularly goes above and beyond the call of duty for all her patients. She truly understands what caring for a person is; she lives this mantra daily. She displays compassion and kindness, because it's the little things that often mean the most. Nadeen has empowered me to reignite the feeling of why I do this work. I know firsthand what it's like to be an oncology patient; to have the rug pulled

out from under you and see your life flashing before you. As an oncology nurse serving at the bedside, I have had the honor to work with and have been cared for by some exceptional nurses. Nadeen is one of those nurses.