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Web Exclusive: A Q&A with an Extraordinary Healer

BY KATHY LATOUR

A Q&A with Christine Wilson, RN, winner of the 2009 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing.

Christine Wilson, RN, of Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, was awarded *CURE*'s 2009 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing at a ceremony in San Antonio in April 2009.

Wilson was one of three finalists selected from an essay contest in which cancer patients, survivors, caregivers, and peers nominated oncology nurses for personal and professional qualities including compassion, expertise, helpfulness, and insight.

CURE staff reviewed essays that eloquently testified to the impact oncology nurses have on the physical and emotional healing experienced during and after cancer treatment.

Wilson spoke with *CURE* about her work as a pediatric oncology nurse and its personal impact.

How long had you been out of nursing school when Delaney became your patient?

I would say I started working only about six months before, so I got to know her right when she was diagnosed and through her treatment until she was finished.

Why did you decide to go into oncology?

I felt drawn to it for some unexplainable reason. I remember when I was growing up, I vaguely knew of a child who had battled cancer. That's what maybe got me thinking, but also nursing school. And looking for a job—I went right to the oncology unit and I knew it was going to be pediatrics. I just felt drawn. I really feel that there is a calling above my own that led me there. I loved it. I loved it right from the beginning.

How do you cope when you have a patient, like Delaney, who you know may not make it?

Always be emotionally involved. Almost all your instincts want to say “no” and pull back, but it helps to connect with your fellow peers. It helps to connect with the family, to stay emotionally charged in the situation. And it can be draining, but as you’re giving, you’re receiving so much from the families, from the patients, from your peers. You just look at them, and they know what kind of day you’re having. Their hugs, their words are so encouraging.

How do you do it day in and day out?

I leave and just be. Even if it was a tough day, I remember the little things you’re so thankful for, whether it was a good white blood count or just seeing the family of a patient get good news or to be able to make it through one more day. You really celebrate the small victories. I was also very blessed to go home to a very supportive husband who was able to listen to a lot of it.

Do you think it’s changed your attitude in terms of being a mother now about your own children?

Yes. It’s definitely easier to put yourself in the parents’ shoes, and that’s very difficult. Just the other day I was taking care of a little boy who is my son’s age, and I had to go into the bathroom and cry. But what I got out of it was that I loved this little boy. I just wanted to hug him and kiss him, so I almost think in a way it was an advantage, whether it was just that he reminded me of my little boy, that I was able to connect with him that much more.

What’s the best thing about being an oncology nurse?

Honestly, I think it’s just human connection. You see humanity at every level, there are no walls. All walls are broken down. You walk in, and some of these families’ lives are just shattered by this new diagnosis, and with nursing you have a unique opportunity to pick up those pieces, enable the family to try and help the child maintain their childhood, and enable the parents by giving them the tools to help their child deal with the cancer.

What’s the hardest aspect of pediatric oncology nursing?

The hardest thing, apart from watching the physical and emotional suffering of our patients, would be watching the pain in the parents’ or the caregivers’ eyes. That’s really hard, and it’s hard when their support system isn’t there completely. Even their closest friends on the outside don’t really know what’s going on in certain situations. Because in that one moment you can do your work, but then you go home and you can’t be there for them.