

IN EVERY ISSUE

Comfort in Strange Places

BY SUSIE KASINSKI DRUMMOND

Learning to appreciate the best seat in the house.

After a lengthy, late-afternoon consultation with my oncologist, a nurse and I toured the medical facility. So the first time I walked into the infusion room, it was after 5 p.m. Until that point, I had handled my biopsy, breast cancer diagnosis, and treatment plan in stride. But one look at that room, and my knees buckled. It forced me to accept that I was sick.

I tried to maintain a positive outlook as I prepared for each grueling chemotherapy infusion. I imagined my sessions as fun outings rather than dreaded appointments. Yet, these early visits were daunting as I watched other patients enter the room, expose their ports, and get infused.

It seemed a much too personal experience for such a public arrangement of seats. I believed private rooms would be better than the group experience. But that was before I witnessed the importance of community when it came to battling cancer.

During months of treatment, I watched fellow patients endure good weeks and awful moments. When someone was diverted to the only private room, it usually meant a detour to the nearby hospital was imminent.

Joan, a cancer comrade, commented on a low point in my course of therapy when, she said, she saw me “sitting in that chair just sicker than a dog.” We managed to laugh, knowing we were all in this together, each of us as vulnerable as the next. Although no one had a last name, those patients became my chemo buddies.

There was Pete, two decades my senior, who always commented on the status of my eyebrows because he knew that being bald bothered me much less than the loss of my lashes and brows. Their absence caused me more angst than the stubble sprouting from my naked skull.

Then there was Dave, who offered to pay the nurses to get the women in the infusion room to stop talking. The bribes grew with the volume of the women’s conversations.

Despite a seemingly ominous ovarian cancer diagnosis, Gina, a triathlete, inspired us with her endurance. We celebrated her return to racing.

One day, we shared stories of Barb’s premature passing and the time she presented an impromptu scarf-tying seminar to a group of bald women hooked up to intravenous drips. We remembered her inherent beauty, which she wrapped so gracefully in chiffon and love. As we reminisced, we privately wondered who

would die next and who would be cured.

Some patients were regulars; others I met only once. Still others appeared on the newspaper's obituary page with pat phrases such as "lost a courageous battle." Most finished treatment and never looked back, but all of them live on in my memory.

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As I sat in the infusion room and welcomed toxic chemicals into my body, I was arrogant and strong, yet humble and grateful. I was part of a group that shared health updates, compared treatment notes, and suggested ways to reduce nausea. My fellow survivors understood what it was like to vomit until you feared your toenails would fly out of your mouth. They recognized new anticancer drugs' impact on our life span. They appreciated each Thursday morning's dose of hope.

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Now, when I visit my oncologist, I glance around the once-intimidating infusion room. It looks the same, but my view is much brighter. The dark shadows have dissipated. Instead, I see hand-crafted blankets draped over chairs, a collection of colorful hats, and the coffeepot brewing another cup of comfort. I can't help but smile.

At the beginning of my cancer journey, the room overwhelmed me. In the end, I realized it was simply the place where I was infused with hope.

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**Names have been changed to respect patient privacy.*