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# Extraordinary Healer

BY JENNIFER HAUPT

*A Q&A with Karen Marchman, winner of the 2008 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing.*

Karen Marchman, RN, OCN, CCRP, of Florida Hospital Cancer Institute in Orlando, was awarded *CURE*'s 2008 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing at a ceremony in Philadelphia in May 2008.

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

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

Marchman spoke with *CURE* about her work as an oncology nurse and its personal impact.

### **What do you do as a clinical research nurse?**

I work with patients who are on trial medications for all types of cancer. Once the patient is on the trial medication, I work with the doctor to oversee treatment, reviewing the lab work and the dosage with the doctor, and monitoring the possible side effects. My other main role is that of a patient advocate to protect their rights as a research patient.

### **How do you put your patients at ease?**

I let them know I'm here to give them information and answer their questions. A lot of times they don't know the questions or are afraid to ask the big ones. So, I open the door for them. I may say to a young adult, "You probably want to know how this medication will affect your ability to have children." Or, I may say to a breast cancer patient, "You may have questions about what this treatment means for reconstruction or your long-term self image." Once I bring up one of the tough questions, patients generally start opening up about their entire life.

### **What do you learn from your patients?**

The biggest thing I've learned is perspective—what really matters in life. The important things are the people you love and the time you put into those relationships. These patients give me a reality check about mortality and remind me how blessed I am.

**Besides the patients, what makes your job special?**

It's tremendously exciting to see some of the advancements made in cancer treatment during the past decade—whether it's a cure or something that makes chemo treatment more tolerable. We've taken a disease where a diagnosed patient survived six months or a year and prolonged that to five years or longer. Even giving someone an extra six months to spend with their child can mean a lot.

**What advice do you give your patients about how to approach living with cancer?**

I tell patients that we'll do whatever is medically possible to treat the disease and make their life as comfortable as possible, but they need to enjoy whatever they are able to. I won't lie to them—cancer is horrible and it's awful to have to live with it. Together, we're going to fight it every way we can. At the same time, life goes on and it can be good.

**The essay that nominated you was submitted by Sheila McThenia, a breast cancer patient. How does Sheila inspire you?**

Sheila was diagnosed with breast cancer at the young age of 40. She had surgery to remove a breast, and just completed a year of chemotherapy and a trial drug to stop the cancer from spreading. There's an excellent chance that the cancer won't come back, but she's clear that there are no guarantees. She's working toward getting into medical school, raising her sons, and living her life to the fullest. She has not allowed cancer to be a road block but has used it to motivate herself to another level.

**Besides “good health,” if you could have one wish granted for every cancer patient you see, what would it be?**

That they could learn to make the choice of happiness. Some can make this choice and others struggle very strongly with it. I see it makes all the difference. The trick is to come to a place of contentment and also keep fighting the disease—it's a hard balance to maintain.