

IN EVERY ISSUE

# 2007 Extraordinary Healer Award Finalists

BY RACHEL BAUMGARTNER AND TERRI SCHINAZI

*Patients honor their oncology nurses.*

Following are two of the finalist essays for **CURE's 2007 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing**. The Extraordinary Healer Award recipient Brian Elliott, RN, director at Colquitt Regional-Singletary Oncology Center in Moultrie, Georgia, as well as the winning essay by Margaret Light are featured in the Fall 2007 issue of *Heal*.

## Prom Night

### **Tish Mullen: my very own fairy godmother nurse**

I was diagnosed with a tumor wrapped around my spinal cord at the age of 15, and then relapsed at 18 and then again at 19. Over those years, Tish Mullen was not just a nurse—she was my home-care nurse making lots of special trips to my house.

I still remember the first time my family and I met Tish eight years ago. She came to our house when I was fresh out of my first of endless hospital stays. She showed us how the I.V. backpack worked and told us to make sure to change the batteries before bed so it did not scream in the middle of the night from weakness. She also helped my dad give me my first of numerous shots and was sweet enough to try to not do too much instructing because my dad gives shots in people's mouths every day (he's a dentist).

You see, I never seem to follow the "rules" when it comes to anything medical, which meant Tish always seemed to be called at the worst times—middle of the night, during dinner, you get the point.

On the non-emergency visits, she would come early in the mornings and slip into my room when I was sleeping and check my blood pressure, temperature, and other vital signs. Then she would take blood from my I.V. line in my chest and change out my I.V. bags. All of this was done in the dark of my bedroom and with me remaining asleep—and I am a light sleeper in the morning!

Many times, my I.V. backpack would break in the middle of the night and the alarm would start screaming. Or I would find that my needle had shifted in my chest and fluid had pumped persistently just under my skin and not into my vein—enough that it looked like I had a third breast. Or my port would just stop

working.

She would always be over quickly to save the day with a loving grandmotherly touch.

Everything mentioned would have been amazing in and of itself, but the way she earned the term “Fairy Godmother Nurse” really came about in a different and extraordinary way.



Rachel Baumgartner (left) with her nurse, Tish Mullen. Photo by Vinnie Amesse

I was extremely sick and in the hospital for most of the second semester of my senior year of high school. Well, when prom came around, it was really touch-and-go whether I would be in the hospital or not. Because of Tish, I was not in the hospital, got to attend prom, stayed out late, and all of this without my ever-present I.V. backpack. This was quite a feat!

She came over right before I got ready and removed my I.V. and I.V. backpack as part of getting ready (sort of a substitute for doing my hair since there was none). I put on my flowing royal blue gown and was whisked off as a princess for the evening—putting the fact that I was going into an intense life-threatening stem cell transplant in a week in the back of my mind.

At about 4 in the morning, I arrived home from the after-festivities and called Tish, as I had been instructed to do. She came over and safely put the I.V. back in like it had never left.

This is a small example of the type of person Tish is—caring, selfless, and trying to help pediatric oncology patients with all of her resources—lots of them—kept in her car. Mainly herself.

—*Rachel Baumgartner*

*Tish Mullen, RN, PNP, works at Provide Infusion in Earth City, Missouri.*

## A First and Final Challenge

### **Rita Deimler's genuine spirit of living**

She is often asked why she chose the field of oncology, as it is such a depressing line of work at times. Her choice was made early when she was in nursing school. She had the fortune of training with an instructor who specialized in oncology.

Because of the instructor's background, their group did a rotation on the oncology ward, where Rita was assigned to an elderly man who was newly diagnosed with cancer. He was an ornery and abrupt man, unwilling to grant much time or patience to his fledgling student. Despite all her best efforts, she couldn't calm him, much less teach or prepare him for his cancer journey before him.

Her assignment with him ended, but he remained on her mind. She visited him

one evening later that week, at which time they sat and talked a long while. He apologized for his demeanor, and they had a poignant discussion about his life and what his diagnosis meant to him. As a student, he was her first challenge. As a patient, cancer could be his final challenge. Together they helped each other. Being able to reach him made such an impact on her that her choice in oncology nursing was clear.

The dynamics of oncology inspired Rita to want to learn more about the many facets of this field of medicine. Her most significant and constant lesson was the importance of survivorship to patients. She tailored her care to each patient and their survival needs.



Terri Schinazi (left) with her nurse, Rita Deimler. Photo by Vinnie Amesse

Rita has been a rock for many people and my rock for the last seven years. I have been challenged with two different breast cancers, a stem cell transplant, a brain stem tumor, non-small cell lung cancer, removal of a leiomyosarcoma on my kidney, a handful of surgeries, a host of scans and tests, and countless visits to my doctor. Her tender and loving heart is sometimes revealed in her tears as she holds my hand through every step of this cancer experience. She takes time out of her busy day to be by my side through these challenges as often as she can.

She has become my best and most loyal friend. She also became a colleague when she accepted a position on the board of directors of my public charity, Wings For A Cure, which was formed expressly for distributing complimentary copies of our book, *Finding the "CAN" in Cancer*, to patients across the country. She unselfishly donates her time and efforts in securing financial aid to help accomplish the goals of Wings For A Cure.

As a patient for many years, I have been presented with many different nurse personalities and have wondered why some nurses continue to stay in oncology when it is clear they have lost their compassion. Rita's compassion runs through her veins. She is a gifted provider and a natural caregiver of souls.

During treatments, we enjoy laughing and making jokes, and laughter is heard throughout the treatment room. The laughter becomes contagious and spreads across the room. It is such an important gift to share in the healing process of cancer.

Rita manages the nursing staff at the Duke Adult Bone Marrow and Stem Cell Transplant Program, and has recently been accepted into the Duke University master's program in oncology nursing. Oncology nursing is her true calling and she feels honored to be on the front line of patient care. She is passionate about her future of being able to influence research and treatments that will improve the quality of the patient's cancer journey.

—*Terri Schinazi*

***Rita Deimler, RN, BSN, OCN, works for the Duke Adult Bone Marrow and Stem Cell Transplant Program at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina.***

