

IN EVERY ISSUE

How Do I Get Her?

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Winning Essay: CURE's 2008 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing

“How do I get *her* as my nurse?” That is what people wonder when they see Karen Marchman sitting with me during my treatments, standing by my side as I schedule my next PET scan, and doublechecking the accuracy of my trial drug dosage. Her white lab coat reveals her profession, but her smile, warmth, and care radiate far beyond her coat. Her name tag states “Clinical Research Coordinator, Oncology Nurse,” but reading between the lines, it says trusted confidant, tireless advocate, and priceless resource.

All my senses operated at full gear that first day I met Karen. At age 40 and a mother of four young sons, I had just received a devastating diagnosis of stage 3 breast cancer. After my oncologist laid out my treatment options and recommended I participate in a clinical trial, Karen entered my world.

Full of hope and loaded with information, Karen introduced herself, explaining the finer details of the trial and answering my countless questions. I remember wondering out loud how she could exude such genuine joy when working with cancer patients all day, every day. I have come to learn that Karen possesses a mysterious, perhaps sacred, ability to risk emotionally attaching herself to each patient, knowing some will die while under her care.

She gives what Ralph Waldo Emerson described best: “The only gift is a portion of thyself.” While I suspect an exceptional level of authentic concern for her patients has always marked Karen’s career, her tender care bears the marks of one well acquainted with the fragility and frailty of life.

Visit after visit, I light up as I see Karen enter the chemo room. As the caustic drugs aimed at saving my life pour into my veins, I excitedly update Karen on my life’s goings-on since my last treatment.

“I ran a 5K race. My thigh muscles still seem weak. Do you think it’s the Taxotere? ... My brain seemed a little slow after treatment. Can I move my next treatment to after my exam?” Hour upon hour, she flawlessly answers my myriad of medical questions, precisely chronicles my clinical symptoms, and thoughtfully addresses my real fears. As Walt Whitman attested, “We convince by our presence,” and it is in this faithful presence that Karen’s true strength resides.

Yet her extraordinary care is equally matched by her professional knowledge and skill. This nurse knows her stuff.

She is a priceless resource. When a newspaper article raised questions about my

clinical trial drug, I turned to Karen. Knowing how important research was to me, she superseded her job description and found me the cited study. She highlighted relevant portions and discussed my concerns with my oncologist and study doctor.

She is a trusted confidant. When faced with the news that my beloved and trusted oncologist was closing her practice, I felt lost and helpless. Karen provided a stabilizing force to my buckling knees, assuring me I would find a new doctor I could trust. Her insight and professional guidance in selecting a new oncologist ensured that I continued to receive the best care.

She is a tireless advocate. When I recently decided to pursue graduate school in medicine, I experienced tremendous difficulty passing the health requirements due to my ongoing treatment. With the registration deadline just hours away and devoid of any more emotional energy to explain my “cancer situation” one more time, Karen rescued me, digging through my paperwork over the Christmas holiday to push the required health forms through the university’s bureaucracy.

I hear survivors speak about cancer as a blessing. Not me. I hate cancer. Yet, amidst my hate of cancer, I have learned to see the beauty of the true treasures that emerge from the mist and fog enveloping this cancer journey. Karen Marchman is one of my treasures—one of my jewels. I’m so grateful I got *her*.