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Web Exclusive: Saving Lives

BY PATRICIA NEE

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

I was dying when I came to St. Luke's Hospital. Technically I was alive—my Burkitt's-like lymphoma was in remission after four brutal rounds of chemotherapy—but I was dying, emotionally and spiritually. My past four months had been a downward spiral—intensive chemo, hours alone at home, so weak I needed a walker, days in isolation with neutropenia, worries, finances, the future, survival. When I looked in the mirror, a bald person with dead eyes stared back. I didn't know her. I didn't want to be her.

At my first meeting with my transplant doctors, they told me more high-dose chemo was in my future. I thought, "No, it isn't. I won't survive." But I shuffled off to the scheduled battery of scans: PET, CT, MUGA. Then to meetings with a cardiologist, pulmonary doctor, social worker, financial advisor, psych nurse—a psych nurse? I thought, "OK, what's one more?" And that was absolutely the best thing that ever happened to me because I met Linda Huber, advanced practice psychiatric nurse for the bone and marrow transplant program at St. Luke's Cancer Institute.

When I came to her office, I was exhausted from two days of testing, and I just wanted to go home. Linda was the last appointment of the day. She was very nice and very perceptive. I found myself telling her things I hadn't planned on saying, and that I hadn't shared with anyone.

When it was time to go I joked, "So, am I crazy?" She answered, "Yes. But that makes it so much more interesting." She told me I had to come back, that we had work to do. We surely did.

Some people "know" they will beat their cancer. I never did. I just plodded ahead. Linda invited me to stop and think about my destination, and how I was traveling on the cancer journey. She pointed out my "stinkin' thinkin'" and suggested ways to change. I saw her every week throughout the summer as I struggled to get strong enough for a transplant.

She called to check on me. Often we emailed, and I appreciated that she would take time from her busy schedule. Gradually she fanned the small spark of hope still within me. I felt like I was waking up, emerging from a cave into sunlight. I started to laugh again.

Now I had a companion and guide on my journey, one who listened with her heart. I wasn't so alone. Linda promised she would see me every day while I was

hospitalized, and she kept that promise. She even gave me her home phone number for weekends. I was amazed at her generosity, and her skill in pinpointing where I needed to change my thought processes.

On my first day of transplant chemo, which I had been dreading, in came Linda with a Beanie Baby chicken. I had been afraid I would be a chicken about more high-dose chemo. I laughed and, suddenly, I just knew things would go well. That was a small act of kindness, but a huge gift to me.

Linda's kindness and generosity with her time continued after the transplant. Cancer patients have walked through the fire. Often they aren't the same people any more. I needed help to reorient myself to my new identity as a survivor. The Cancer Institute offers unlimited counseling to their patients, and it is such a necessary thing. We are not our diseases. We are body-mind-soul beings.

I feel the care I received from my doctors and nurses was absolutely the best. But I also know that for me, Linda Huber made all the difference. Eight months after my stem cell transplant, I sat at the survivors' celebration banquet for bone and marrow transplant patients, and listened to a man declare passionately, "Linda Huber saved my life." I nodded. Mine too. And I joined in the spontaneous applause and cheers.

Cancer is no blessing, but it can bring so many blessings in its wake. Linda is that for me, and for many of us who now belong to the fellowship of cancer survivors. She was, and still is, a dear friend and companion on my journey through the fire.