

# **Extraordinary** **HEALER**<sup>®</sup> 2023



cure<sup>®</sup> Readers Honor Oncology Nurses / Volume 17

*With the Extraordinary Healer® Award for oncology nursing, we at CURE® present our readers with a unique opportunity each year to honor oncology nurses who have helped guide them through the cancer experience. This year, many patients, survivors, caregivers and health care professionals submitted inspirational essays describing the compassion, expertise and helpfulness that these special nurses exhibited. We have compiled their tributes in Extraordinary Healers®: CURE Readers Honor Oncology Nurses, Volume 17, which celebrates the extraordinary men and women who make a difference in patients' lives. Coupled with compelling photography, these moving stories of oncology nurses are told in CURE readers' own words.*



To read the essays online, along with many more that were submitted to this year's contest, please **scan the QR code** and click on "Extraordinary Healers Volume 17."

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*CURE*® Readers Honor Oncology Nurses

**Volume 17**







*CURE*® Readers Honor Oncology Nurses

**Volume 17**

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This book is dedicated to all oncology nurses who bring hope and healing to patients with cancer and their loved ones.

If you would like to give this book as a gift to your extraordinary healer, we've provided this page for your message.

This book honors:

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**110 NOMINEES FOR THE 2023  
EXTRAORDINARY HEALER AWARD**





# Standing With Patients Through the Good and the Bad

**W**e all understand that oncology nurses are special people, but what makes them extraordinary? Nurses have an innate ability to care for others during their cancer journeys, but there are also nurses in the field who go above and beyond the call of duty to make an incredible impact on the lives of their patients and their families.

This year marks the 17th year that *CURE*® has hosted the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. If we include 2023, that means we've honored more than 50 finalists for the award and have read hundreds of essays of nurses who fit that extraordinary description.

Throughout our time hosting this event, we've read numerous stories of oncology nurses wearing their hearts on their sleeves when caring for patients, and this year was no exception. Oncology nurses stand by patients' bedsides through the victories and the setbacks, the good days and the bad days, and everywhere in between.

"(She) was there to celebrate the small and large milestones of my cancer treatment," a patient wrote about her oncology nurse in her nominating essay. "She was there to lend support during some of the most difficult setbacks of my cancer treatment — and there were many. She has been a skilled medical professional, my confidante, an incredible supporter and a beacon of light during some of the darkest times of my life. She has been a stable force »

during such turbulent times. (She) possesses the unique duality of excellent bedside manner and immense medical knowledge.”

Nurses not only impact the lives of patients, their families and their caregivers, but also the colleagues who work alongside them. It does, in fact, take a village to care for patients throughout their journeys.

“(She) is an excellent resource who is committed to increasing her knowledge of the nursing profession,” a nurse wrote about her colleague in her nominating essay. “(She) is invested in the success of each of the new employees that she precepts. She is optimistic, confident and a great listener. She often gives employees and patients an outlet to express their fears, frustrations, anxieties and successes. Her positive attitude offers motivation for new employees to excel.”

Knowledge and expertise are two of the many things nurses carry with them when helping patients with cancer. Sometimes, a smile or a small gesture can take a patient with cancer from a mentality of stress and anxiety to a place of calm.

“Everything was hitting me all at once, and then it happened: (she) walked into the room, and I found complete peace in her smile,” a patient wrote about his nurse in his nominating essay. “It felt warm and compassionate and made me feel secure. She pulled up a chair next to me, sat down and told me in the most reassuring, gentle voice that we would take it one step at a time. My fear literally drifted away, and I finally felt my feet on the ground.” ■

— **Mike Hennessy Jr.**  
*President and CEO of MJH Life Sciences®*









Extraordinary Healer®

**Our Winner  
& Finalists**







**From left: ALEX FRENZEL**, a patient with advanced breast cancer who helped draft the nomination, and **ABBIE KALER, M.S., APRN, FNP-C, CMSRN**

PHOTOS BY **DIANA CHAVEZ**

# CHAMPION OF THE PATIENT'S VOICE

## **ABBIEY KALER, M.S., APRN, FNP-C, CMSRN**

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MD ANDERSON CANCER CENTER  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Written by **Ginny Kirklin, M.P.H.**, on behalf of the Advanced Breast Cancer (ABC) Program steering committee, advocates and patients at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Texas

**O**n behalf of patients with metastatic breast cancer (MBC), advocates and members of the Advanced Breast Cancer (ABC) Program at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center (MDACC), we are thrilled to nominate the ABC Program's nurse practitioner navigator, **Abbey Kaler, M.S., APRN, FNP-C, CMSRN**.

Abbey is so many things to each of us personally and is a beloved and treasured friend. She has been instrumental in the fight against MBC within MDACC and beyond. Her contributions and impact are far-reaching in helping create and implement many important supportive programs to assist patients with MBC, caregivers and health care providers alike. This is largely because she has an ear attuned to listening that helps her represent the patient's voice. »

## WINNING ESSAY

Abbey's immersion into the medical world began at a very young age. When she was 9 years old, Abbey received a diagnosis of juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma, a rare benign brain tumor. Two brain surgeries later, doctors successfully removed the entire mass and, fortunately, it has not reappeared.

Abbey has shared that she remembers how she and her family felt vulnerable and helpless during this time. Questions of her mortality surfaced during her health scare at that tender age. She recalls how grateful she was for the supportive nurses and doctors during those frightening times.

In addition, it ignited Abbey's desire to pursue a medical career in hopes of caring for and supporting patients. In 2011, Abbey received her Bachelor of Science in nursing at Baptist Health Sciences University in Memphis, Tennessee. Thankfully, in a different capacity, she returned to MDACC, not as a patient this time but as a bedside registered nurse working in the targeted therapy clinical center with patients participating in phase 1 clinical trials. With her past experiences, memories and natural empathy, she could share her experiences and educate the patients to empower them.

Moreover, in 2019, MDACC published an article about Abbey. She was quoted as saying, "So if I, as a nurse, could use any of my knowledge to help them have a bit more control over the situation and feel a little less scared, that was the biggest gift I could give."

Abbey continued her postgraduate education to become a family nurse practitioner in 2017. She daily follows the motto "Love, Listen and Heal." She was hired as a nurse practitioner navigator for the ABC program in the department of breast medical oncology (BMO) at MDACC in 2018 and has been essential in the initiation and implementation of many patient support programs.

Additionally, she is enrolled as a Ph.D. nursing student at the UTHealth Houston Cizik School of Nursing, where she was awarded a Jane and Robert Cizik Scholarship. Her research focuses on incorporating the patient's voice in their care planning to improve the overall experience of individuals with metastatic cancer.

## WINNING ESSAY

Abbey had an article published in the journal *Nursing Forum* in 2022 as part of her doctoral work: “Patient Voice in Metastatic Cancer: A Conceptual Analysis.” Indeed, this is one of the extraordinary qualities of Abbey that sets her apart: Abbey closely works with each patient and uses the patient’s voice to positively influence their quantity and quality of life. Patient education and empowerment utilizing the patient’s voice are two of Abbey’s true loves and life pursuits.

She is an accomplished researcher and presented several posters at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium in December 2022. All presentations focused on supporting patients with MBC. She also was a finalist for the 2022 Brown Foundation Award for Excellence in Oncology Nursing. This is one of MDACC’s highest nursing honors and recognizes excellence in all aspects of oncology nursing, including patient care and adherence to standards in clinical treatment.

Our ABC Program is unique in that grassroots efforts of a small support group of patients with MBC, caretakers and advocates made its creation a reality. They quickly gained support of faculty and staff at MDACC, and together they collaborated to brainstorm and plan. Meeting once a month on site, this fledgling group formed to expand their idea of building a new program that met the distinctive needs of patients with MBC, to support them and their families through the emotional and physical roller coaster of MBC treatments.

With institutional support and huge fundraising efforts by patients with MBC, caretakers and advocates, the ABC program has quickly grown into a wonderfully diverse and cohesive group of research and practicing physicians and faculty, nurses, patients with MBC and advocates. Its overriding goal is to improve the quality and quantity of life of patients with MBC.

Abbey has been instrumental in the growth of the program and its many initiatives. She has been involved with collaborative grant writing, program implementation and communications among all its working parts.

In addition to her professional contributions, Abbey and her family have participated annually as part of the wildly successful MBC fundraising team, Stomp Out Stage 4 Breast »

## WINNING ESSAY

Cancer, at MDACC's annual institutional Boot Walk to End Cancer fundraiser. The money raised has helped support the ABC program and, ironically, provided the essential "seed money" to hire our dedicated nurse navigator, Abbey Kaler, in 2018.

Abbey's telehealth appointments with patients with MBC have steadily grown to assist more than 300 patients each year. Abbey also moderates the weekly virtual MBC support group. By its virtual nature, the hourlong meetings have reached patients across the country and average 20 attendees weekly. Abbey skillfully manages the meetings to allow all who are connected to participate; ask questions related to symptoms, treatments and side effects; and communicate with other patients with MBC. Abbey's medical knowledge and compassion always help make it rewarding, and a close camaraderie has developed among its members.

Abbey also organizes and moderates a popular weekly virtual webinar, "The ABCs of Healthy Living in Challenging Times." She has invited guest speakers, faculty and staff to educate the broader community. More than 130 webinars have been presented so far, with topics including medicine and research, participatory self-expression (art, dance and writing) and end-of-life discussions. Importantly, these have helped to educate and empower patients with MBC and are an important component of her nurse navigator toolbox.

Voices of patients with MBC have been able to initiate and shape many new grant initiatives. Abbey was instrumental in starting a medical partnership with general internal medicine at MDACC. This unique partnership is named the LIMBS clinic (Linking Internal Medicine and Metastatic Breast Cancer for Success clinic) and was specifically created for patients with MBC lacking an outside primary care physician who was comfortable treating patients with this disease. This addressed a need vocalized by many patients with MBC who required specialized medical care complicated by their ongoing metastatic cancer.

Abbey has collaborated on grant writing with BMO research faculty on several grant initiatives that greatly benefited the MBC community. Again, this was often driven by »








## WINNING ESSAY

listening to patient voices. For instance, an implemented Pfizer grant enables patients on oral oncolytic treatments to have bloodwork done at local laboratories outside of MDACC and follow up with their oncologist via a video visit. The lab results can now be forwarded to the doctor via email rather than by faxing, which further increases efficiency. This has also helped to minimize the number of trips to MDACC by patients who live a distance away.

The post-mortem tissue collection subcommittee was formed to restart the collection and analysis of tissues donated by patients with MBC after their death. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily suspended this important research work, but with collaboration from Abbey, patient advocates and researchers, it has reopened again for enrollment. This novel approach will enhance ongoing investigations into further characterizing MBC pathology, which may help lead to new therapeutic strategies and therapies. And what a beautiful gift for a patient to give at the end of their life! Again, we have Abbey to thank for helping to connect the ABC program with other MDACC departments to advance research and clinical initiatives.

Abbey has been deeply involved in a multitude of ways in increasing both the quality and length of lives of patients with MBC. She is our ABC program champion. She listens and acts on what she learns from the patient's voice. On top of all Abbey's accomplishments within the ABC program at MDACC, she is also a loving wife and mother of two young girls. Abbey has dedicated her life to fighting metastatic breast cancer in countless ways and is truly worthy of the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. 

# PART OF A PATIENT'S TEAM

AN INTERVIEW WITH **ABBEY KALER, M.S., APRN, FNP-C, CMSRN**

By Mark Cantrell



**M**ost 9-year-old children are innocent and carefree, with the challenges and travails of adulthood still far ahead of them. But for **Abbey Kaler, M.S., APRN, FNP-C, CMSRN**, that wasn't the case. When she began vomiting and having headaches, her parents became worried, and when she fainted and woke up with tunnel vision, her mother rushed her to the emergency department. There she received a diagnosis of juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma, a rare childhood brain tumor.

After surgery to remove the benign tumor, Kaler spent two weeks in recovery and then was referred to The University of Texas MD Anderson Children's Cancer Hospital in Houston to monitor her health to make sure the growth didn't return. Although she didn't know it at the time, the experience would guide her career path as an adult. In fifth grade, "I had to complete a science fair project. I chose to learn more about the anatomy of the brain," she remembers. "The science fair project helped me to understand in my own way about the diagnosis and my new reality."

Remembering how caring and helpful the nurses at MD Anderson had been, Kaler decided she wanted to be a healer as well. She earned a Bachelor's of Science in nursing at Baptist Health »


## WINNER INTERVIEW

Sciences University in Memphis, Tennessee, then returned to MD Anderson as a clinical nurse on a general internal medicine and telemetry unit, where she worked with patients in phase 1 clinical trials.

“That was my goal,” she says, “to return to the institution that had cared for me and my family at such a vulnerable time. I wanted to provide the same level of care in my work that was shown to us.” As a bedside nurse on the telemetry floor for five years, Kaler honed her skills working with patients at the most vulnerable time in their lives, just as nurses had cared for her. It also was where she realized the importance of patient education. “I believe that knowledge is power,” she says. “Working with patients to teach them and help them understand more about their unique situation is truly a highlight of my career.”

Kaler returned to school to earn a master’s degree and family nurse practitioner (FNP) certification in 2015. In her last semester of the master’s degree program, she completed a practicum in the Nellie B. Connally Breast Center at MD Anderson and immediately knew she’d found her niche. “I fit well with the team of physicians, nurse practitioners, pharmacists and nurses,” she says. “The Advanced Breast Cancer (ABC) program was hiring for the role of APRN (advanced registered nurse practitioner) navigator about the time I graduated with my master’s degree and FNP certification.” She was offered the job and immediately accepted it, a position she still holds.

But Kaler had a desire for further education. She is in her second year of a doctorate program, while still working full time at the MD Andersen ABC program. She has written a paper to define patient voice in the metastatic cancer population. It describes how it can be incorporated into a patient’s overall care plan to improve patients’ experiences in treatment.

But her true calling is still one-on-one patient care. “I love being an APRN navigator!” Kaler says. “I love talking with my patients and helping to educate them on their current situation. I enjoy being part of their support structure and creating a relationship – knowing I’m part of their team and will always be there to support them.” 







**From left: KERRY O'NEIL, B.S.N., RN, OCN, and  
CYNTHIA POWERS, D.N.P., M.S.N., RN, CPHQ**

**PHOTOS BY NATALIE MOSER**

# EASING THE WAY FOR THOUSANDS OF PATIENTS

**KERRY O'NEIL, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

CITY OF HOPE ORANGE COUNTY, IRVINE, CALIFORNIA

Written by **Cynthia Powers, D.N.P., M.S.N., RN, CPHQ**, Irvine, California

**I**n fall 2022, a 40-year-old mother of three was brought into a City of Hope Orange County clinic where **Kerry O'Neil, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, is the nurse manager. Breast cancer had metastasized to the woman's brain, leaving her blind. Kerry did not know this when she opened the curtain to check on the woman and ask how she was doing.

"Kerry, I've been listening for your voice," said the woman, who was anxious and in pain. "I knew you were going to be here, and I just needed to hear your voice." Sadly, the young mother later died just before Thanksgiving.

"It was very sad and that was hard," Kerry said. "You know you can't cure everybody, but you can help them. If you can make their journey a little bit lighter and a little bit easier for them, that's what you need to focus on."

In her 40 years as an oncology nurse and supervisor, Kerry has eased the way for thousands of patients with cancer and their families. Patients remember her professional expertise, »

## FINALIST ESSAY

compassionate listening, comforting touch and calm demeanor — and all the ways big and small that she makes a difference in their lives. Kerry exemplifies all of City of Hope's values: compassion, service with a sense of urgency, integrity, intellectual curiosity, excellence and collaboration. Hundreds of patients provide feedback on her outstanding care.

Recently, Kerry was walking her dog, Maggie, when she was approached by a woman and her daughter. "You were my mom's favorite nurse 30 years ago," the woman said. Kerry quickly realized who the patient was; she had made Kerry a Christmas ornament. Kerry shared that she thought of the woman every year when she put the ornament on the tree. The next time Kerry saw the woman and her daughter walking, she gave them the ornament. "And they just broke down in tears," Kerry said, "They said they couldn't believe I kept it. I said, 'Of course. It meant a lot. That's how she showed me that she appreciated me.'"

Reflecting on a career of medical excellence and extraordinary compassion, Kerry says her proudest moments have been when she could gain patients' trust, educate them about their disease, advocate for their care and serve as a healer to ease their journey. Kerry is frequently the voice of her patients.

She remembers a quiet and stoic man with relapsed acute myeloid leukemia who could not bear to tell his wife he wanted to discontinue treatment. However, he trusted Kerry to explain the situation and his difficult choice. Kerry still vividly remembers the difficult conversation and the wife's concern, especially since the couple had a very young daughter. Kerry's calming demeanor helped everyone come to terms with the situation. Ultimately, the patient was able to pass away at home, with his large extended family surrounding him and all at peace with his decision. Kerry has been successful in gaining patients' trust, often bringing about extraordinary outcomes.

She is particularly proud of her care of a patient who had been thrown a curveball in a difficult situation. When Kerry first walked in the room, he was so upset he barely talked to her. However, Kerry convinced him and his wife that although the road through chemotherapy would be tough, they were "going for a cure." Months later — and after many difficult treatments — Kerry



## FINALIST ESSAY

was proved right. The patient's cancer was in remission, and the couple responded with a note, calling her "an angel sent from heaven."

With her extraordinary talent for compassion and brilliant expertise, it might seem Kerry was destined for oncology nursing. However, as she tells the story, she found this specialty almost by chance. She says she followed a group of Fitchburg State University nursing school peers to California from Massachusetts soon after graduation and quickly found a job. "They asked me to choose a medical unit, and I was caught off guard until I remembered that oncology was always my toughest class, so I said, 'Put me in oncology. Maybe I'll learn something.'" Of course, Kerry did more than learn something. She excelled.

She says oncology is exciting to her because she enjoys the challenges of understanding nearly every system of the human body. And most of all, she believes that patients with cancer truly appreciate the compassionate care and the connection they build with their nursing team.

She says that joining the infusion team at City of Hope Newport Beach as a nursing manager two years ago was a natural fit, but she made one stipulation upon accepting a managerial role — she still wanted time to care for patients.

Kerry is constantly looking for ways to make connections among patients and ensure they do not feel alone in their journey. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when a group of patients with multiple myeloma came to City of Hope Newport Beach Fashion Island to receive infusions, Kerry introduced them to one another and arranged to have their infusion chairs turned into a circle so they could talk. The camaraderie and deep friendships among the "Multiple Myeloma Squad" are still going strong. The group dine at each other's houses and plan fund-raising events. For Kerry, accommodating and even laughing with the group at times are all part of the exceptional humanity and understanding she brings to her work.

She says that one of the best parts of her job is when patients tell her they aren't scared anymore. Todd Kennedy, a member of the Multiple Myeloma Squad, says, "Kerry O'Neil is an extraordinary healer with deep clinical expertise, a kind heart, a gentle touch and inspired leadership skills. When I was diagnosed, I expected I would dread my time at the infusion center. »









## FINALIST ESSAY

To my surprise, however, I look forward to the physical and emotional healing I receive during every visit with Kerry and the team she leads.”

Another member of the group sent Kerry photos of her daughter’s engagement over the holidays. “They feel like we’re part of the family and if we didn’t help them, they wouldn’t have accomplished this. She was afraid she wouldn’t see her daughter become engaged,” Kerry said.

It is no wonder that Kerry inspired her youngest daughter into nursing. In her nursing school application, her daughter wrote words that might have come from Kerry herself: “Medicine only treats the illness, but nurses treat the person behind the illness.” She also spoke to constantly running into her mother’s patients around town and having them greet her with hugs and “enormous gratitude.” “It is clear to see that the impact of a single nurse is far greater than that of the disease,” her daughter wrote. Kerry, who raised five children, embodies the best of oncology nursing.

I am proud to nominate Kerry O’Neil for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing because she sets the bar higher every day to do more for her patients. She prides herself in demonstrating an exceptional level of both expertise and compassion. We need more people like Kerry to be role models for the next generation of cancer care nurses, and I truly hope more nurses will follow in her footsteps. 📌

# EVERY DAY, SHE HELPS MAKE THINGS BETTER



AN INTERVIEW WITH **KERRY O'NEIL, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

By Mark Cantrell

**M**any nurses who choose oncology as a career have had cancer or had a relative or friend with the disease. **Kerry O'Neil, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, took a more circuitous route. After graduating from Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts, her roommate's mother invited her to come to California for a visit, so O'Neil and five of her friends headed west. The mother lived in a one-room apartment, so the girls were dispersed to neighbors' homes.

The neighbor O'Neil was staying with encouraged her to explore career options, saying she could stay as long as she liked. She'd become interested in nursing while in Massachusetts, so she took her nursing boards and signed up at Hoag Hospital, a local community facility in Newport Beach. There were quite a few nurses with associate degrees at the time, but not that many with bachelor's degrees. O'Neil remembers: "California was kind of desperate for nurses with a bachelor's degree, so they asked me where I wanted to work. That caught me off guard because it's not a question many new grads are asked."

O'Neil's most difficult class in college had been oncology, and although she'd passed the final, she realized she didn't really understand all she'd been taught. "So I thought, 'Well, I'm a new grad and I'm supposed to be learning,' so I asked them to put me on the oncology floor. I ended up with amazing

## FINALIST INTERVIEW

preceptors who took me under their wing and taught me everything they could. And they were very nurturing and so supportive,” she says.

After a few years after O’Neil started working as an inpatient nurse, cancer treatment had started to migrate to outpatient clinics. So O’Neil moved to the outpatient world and worked in a community clinic. Two years ago, City of Hope opened a clinic in Newport Beach, and oncology patients no longer needed to drive all the way to Los Angeles for their treatments. O’Neil applied to be an oncology infusion nurse at the new facility, and the center countered with an offer for a supervisory position. She accepted with one condition: that she could still continue to do patient care.

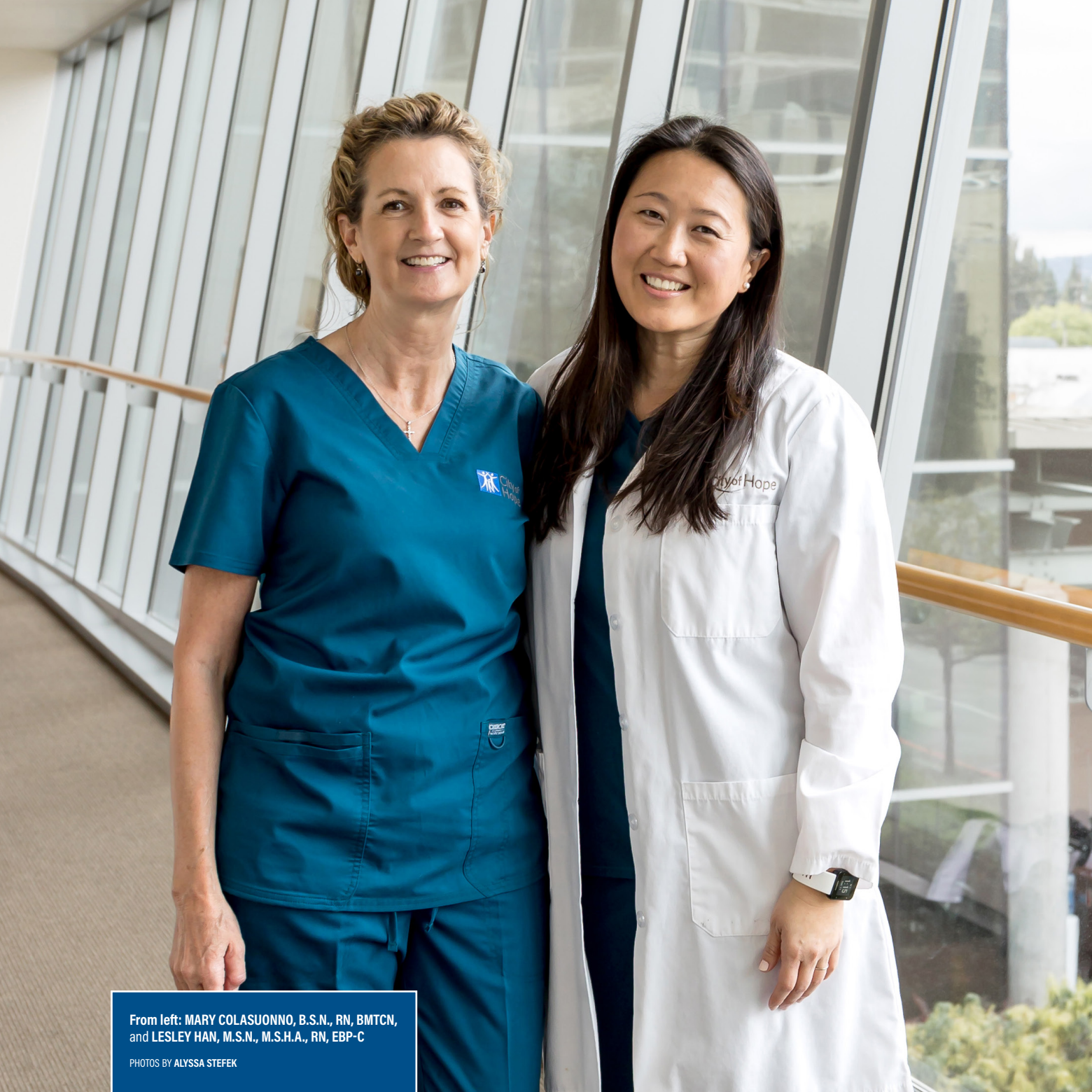
“Generally, when you get into a management position, you’re no longer working in the clinical arena,” O’Neil says. “I’m a little unusual in that I still give patients their chemotherapy, have relationships with them, and I’m still on the floor with the other nurses. I like having that patient interaction; I don’t think I could do it if I didn’t have that, because that’s where my heart is — it’s why I got into nursing in the first place.”

When City of Hope added another clinic, O’Neil became nurse manager for both. “I’m in charge of all the nurses and clinical staff within the two centers, which is quite a bit of responsibility,” she notes. Another challenge is the speed at which technology is changing the field of oncology. But O’Neil got into the specialty because of the opportunity to learn all that it offered, and she still enjoys the challenge.

“You’re learning so much every single day, and there are always so many new things coming down the pike,” she says. “Oncology nurses have been able to see those changes and how it affects their patients. It means we have to stay on top of our game all the time.” One role O’Neil particularly enjoys is that of patient educator, especially to patients with a new diagnosis. Anyone who has received a cancer diagnosis is naturally in shock, and it’s crucial to have someone there to explain things. “You let them know why they’ve been given certain medications and how they work,” O’Neil says. “Much of a patient’s anxiety can be alleviated just by letting them know what’s going to happen to them.”

That education often pays off when patients begin treatment. “The first treatment is always stressful,” O’Neil says. “But it’s so nice when they come back for the second one saying, ‘Oh, it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I took the medication as you told me to, and it made things better.’” ■





**From left: MARY COLASUONNO, B.S.N., RN, BMTCN,  
and LESLEY HAN, M.S.N., M.S.H.A., RN, EBP-C**

PHOTOS BY ALYSSA STEFEK

# A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT

## **MARY COLASUONNO, B.S.N., RN, BMTCN**

CITY OF HOPE NATIONAL MEDICAL CENTER, DUARTE, CALIFORNIA

Written by **Lesley Han, M.S.N., M.S.H.A., RN, EBP-C**, Duarte, California

**M**ary Colasuonno, B.S.N., RN, BMTCN, started her career at the City of Hope National Medical Center (COHNMC) more than 30 years ago. COHNMC is a National Cancer Institute-designated health care facility providing care for patients with cancer in Duarte, California. Mary has worked on a bone marrow transplant inpatient unit for all of her nursing career.

Recently she was asked to step in as an interim nurse manager for another hematology inpatient unit. She wholeheartedly accepted and developed close relationships with the nursing staff there over the span of three months.

In her career as a nurse, she has always made a conscious effort to make every interaction count. Mary is always determined to provide positivity to others. In her own words, positivity fosters healing. She is a firm believer that whatever light you can provide to a patient will be what is needed in that moment. »

## FINALIST ESSAY

Mary has positively affected patients in so many ways. She has inspired her patients to want to do better not only for themselves but for her as well. Mary recalled a patient she took care of 30 years ago. This patient returns to COHNMC each year for the Bone Marrow Transplant Reunion. At this event, patients celebrate their survivorship after having a stem cell transplant at COHNMC. Every year, this patient seeks Mary out to cherish Mary's impact on her healing and conquering of cancer.

Mary's patients have described her as an angel who was especially appointed to care for them. One patient even recognized her voice in a dark room during a nurse shift handoff. This patient was overwhelmed with sadness when she learned that her cancer was no longer treatable. Mary helped this patient cope with the emotional toll that cancer takes on its victims. Even though Mary had been her nurse years prior, she recognized her voice immediately. Mary has a genuine and authentic approach with patients that makes her unforgettable. She prayed with the patient who was faced with the life-wrenching reality of a terminal diagnosis.

Mary goes out of her way to care for patients, even when they aren't assigned to her or even on her unit. Her sister-in-law's husband received a diagnosis of diffuse large B-cell lymphoma. She took it upon herself to discuss the treatment course with her sister-in-law and her husband. »









## FINALIST ESSAY

Mary believes strongly in the value of education and knowledge. She feels compelled to teach each patient about the treatment process and side effects so that patients are not surprised by what occurs. According to Mary, knowledge provides power for patients. In her perspective, nurses can become accustomed to the treatments they provide and they often forget that the experience is extremely new to patients. She goes out of her way to make sure all treatments and interventions are explained to and understood by patients.

Along with patient care, Mary has been a lifetime volunteer. Even during her break from nursing to raise her children, Mary volunteered with the international evangelical Christian nonprofit Awana and her local church. She raised wonderful children who are now her legacy and continue her spirit of volunteerism. Mary is filled with pride when she describes how her son raised more than \$100,000 to build a medical clinic in Zimbabwe.

Her influence has a profound effect on all of those around her. In the past year, she became the propelling force behind a blood pressure clinic at the Duarte Senior Center. She gets to know the senior citizens who come to the clinic and really listens to them. One lady purchased the same blood pressure cuff that Mary uses and came back to show Mary how she was following Mary's advice and tracking her vital signs.

In her interim position as nurse manager over an 18-bed inpatient hematology oncology unit, Mary has led the team to outstanding patient outcomes. Central line bloodstream infections are an ongoing concern at COHNMC. Mary collaborated with infection prevention to ensure that current policies were upheld. She reviewed the policy and expectations for appropriate central line care with every nurse in the unit. Since she started the reinforcement of the policies, their unit has not had one line infection.

Not only is Mary a phenomenal healer for her patients, but she also leads her team to seek out excellence in patient outcomes. In everything Mary does, she does so with empathy and an innate understanding of how others feel. It is my honor to nominate Mary Colasuonno for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. In any and all definitions of a healer, Mary exceeds. Thank you for considering Mary for this distinct honor. 🇺🇸

# CHANGING HER DREAM

AN INTERVIEW WITH **MARY COLASUONNO, B.S.N., RN, BMTCN**

By Mark Cantrell



When **Mary Colasuonno, B.S.N., RN, BMTCN**, set her first career goal, it was about as far from nursing as it could be: She wanted to be a commercial artist. In her senior year of high school, one of her paintings won a contest sponsored by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and it appeared on the front page of the newspaper. That led to a number of offers to attend local art schools. But Colasuonno felt that in order to succeed at an art career, she needed to be in a place with a vibrant art scene. So at age 20, she boarded a Greyhound bus to California.

But instead of the land of opportunity, California seemed to be the land of struggling artists. Sleeping on her aunt's couch helped her financially, but she needed a source of income. So she took a job at JCPenney. While she was working there, Colasuonno began to think about her mother's dream of being a nurse. But her mom had to drop out of high school to help *her* single mother provide for the family. Perhaps, Colasuonno thought, she could pick up that dream where her mother had left off.

She enrolled at Citrus College in Glendora to work on a nursing degree and started working at Methodist Hospital in Arcadia as a courier. She applied for a position in the surgery department and was offered a job as a surgical assistant. In 1987, she was laid off from that job but »

## FINALIST INTERVIEW

immediately took another as an anesthesia technician while still attending college, eventually attaining her associate's degree in nursing and setting her sights on becoming an RN. Citrus College didn't offer that program, so Colasuonno moved to Pasadena City College, from which she graduated in 1989.

"But my very last clinical was at City of Hope, where I worked with cancer patients. And I just fell in love with the patients there," she says. "Working in surgery, I didn't really get to know them, but in oncology, you get to sit and talk with patients and provide an ear when they need to talk to someone about what they're going through."

Before long Colasuonno was working at City of Hope in Duarte as an interim practice nurse, helping patients with aggressive breast, bone marrow, testicular and other cancers. When the hospital opened a bone marrow oncology unit in 1991, she worked there as a bedside and charge nurse for the next 10 years, earning her oncology nursing certification in 1993.

But working full time while raising three boys was taking its toll, and in 2001 Colasuonno left her job to become a stay-at-home mom. With her innate desire to help others, she was anything but idle, volunteering at her church and her boys' schools. But gradually, she began to miss clinical life.

"Even though I was extremely busy as a stay-at-home mother, I wasn't getting the mental stimulation you have when you're working as a nurse," she remembers. When she finally picked up the phone and called City of Hope, the first person she reached was her former interim manager, and soon Colasuonno was back in the career she loves.

"Because I hadn't been there for (more than 7) years, I asked to be put with a group of newly graduated residents," she says. "They really impressed me with how smart they were, and it became apparent that there were things I didn't know that I felt I should. So at 50 years of age, I decided to go back to school for my bachelor's degree."

Colasuonno notes that although nurses often assume the role of teacher, it's a two-way street — their patients often educate and inspire them as well. One of her patients had been so sick as a child that her parents thought she had died, but she told Colasuonno that she knew it wasn't her time yet. After her ordeal, she felt every day was a blessing and was no longer afraid to die.

"She's not the only patient with those kinds of stories," Colasuonno says. "Moments like that with my patients really make me feel I was meant to be a nurse." ■









CHAPTER 1

# Paying It Forward







From left: CYNTHIA DASAAD, M.S.N., RN, OCN, and  
DEBORAH LORICK, M.S.N., M.H.A., RN, OCN

PHOTOS BY NADIA KELM

# A SURVIVOR'S STORY

**DEBORAH LORICK, M.S.N., M.H.A., RN, OCN**

ANTELOPE VALLEY MEDICAL CENTER, LANCASTER, CALIFORNIA

Written by **Cynthia Dasaad, M.S.N., RN, OCN**, Lancaster, California

**W**ho is a survivor? According to the National Cancer Institute, a survivor is one who remains alive and continues to function during and after overcoming a serious hardship or life-threatening disease. A patient with cancer is considered to be a survivor from the time of diagnosis until the end of life.

In my opinion, cancer survivors should also include the patient's family. The family of the patient with cancer also is extremely affected by the diagnosis of their loved one, from diagnosis to the end of their loved one's life and beyond. This is why I consider myself a survivor.

My husband received a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer at age 40. I was 31 years old at the time with two young children, 7 and 9 years old. I was completely lost and felt completely alone at the time. That is when Deborah stepped in.

**Deborah Lorick, M.S.N., M.H.A., RN, RNOCN**, was the assistant nurse manager on the oncology unit where my husband was a patient. Deborah was always making sure that my husband, my children and I were well cared for. I am sure, without a doubt, that Deborah gave this »



## PAYING IT FORWARD

attention to every patient, but she definitely had a way of making me feel like we were the focus of her attention.

As time went on and my husband became very ill, Deborah asked me a very simple yet courageous question, which she says she does not remember asking. She asked me what my plans were once “this was all over” and said, “You should really think about nursing.” At the time, surviving one day at a time — even one hour at a time — was all I could think about. However, that question would swirl through my mind every so often. I had no education past high school. I had no career and very little work experience. I had no idea what I would do when I no longer had to care for my husband, but one thing was for sure: I did not want to be a nurse.

I witnessed with my own eyes how difficult it is to be a nurse. I saw the nurses take care of my husband, giving him multiple blood transfusions, multiple antibiotics, chemotherapy, pain medication every four hours, all while donning and doffing personal protective equipment (PPE), whether it was for contact isolation because my husband had a *Clostridium difficile* infection or to keep my husband safe with reverse isolation PPE. I witnessed nurses work 12 hours tirelessly while remaining compassionate and professional. If there was anything that made me consider nursing, it was the professionalism and compassion that each nurse who cared for my husband had.

Once my husband did pass away, I had to seriously consider how I would provide for my children. The words that Deborah had spoken began to swirl in my head. Although I believed that I could not be a nurse, doors began to open up in that direction. I decided that I would take a leap of faith and see if I could do it.

Deborah was right there ready to cheer me on when she found out I had been accepted to the nursing program at College of the Canyons. Once Deborah realized I was moving in the direction of nursing, she became my cheerleader and mentor. It is truly because of Deborah that I consider myself a survivor.

Once in the nursing program and during my clinical rotations, it was there that I had realized that God could use me to comfort families and assist them through one of the most difficult events in their lives. My first rotation was on the oncology unit where my husband had been a patient. The first patient that I laid my hands on is one I will remember for my entire life. That is



when I decided that I would become an oncology nurse. Being an oncology nurse has been what has given me the title of survivor.

I have continued my education, receiving my bachelor's degree in 2013 and my master's degree in 2019. I am now an oncology nurse navigator. It is because of Deborah that I have become a dedicated oncology nurse, providing compassionate and professional care to every patient I serve.

Deborah is my hero, and I honestly cannot say that I know where I would be if it were not for Deborah caring for my family as a whole. I will always be grateful for Deborah's compassion for my family and for guiding me to the most amazing and rewarding career. I not only survived because of Deborah, but I thrive because of Deborah.

The impact that Deborah has on patients on a daily basis is amazing. I cannot begin to thank her for the impact that she had on the life of my husband. It is because of Deborah that my husband's family are survivors. 🇺🇸

# SHE IS CALLED TO SERVE

## **KELLY BRYANT, RN**

UF HEALTH ONCOLOGY, ORANGE PARK, FLORIDA

Written by **Ides Torres, MLS(ASCP)**, Jacksonville, Florida

**K**elly Bryant, RN, (Mama Kelly, as we call her in the clinic) is a wonderful, caring and compassionate oncology nurse. Kelly is a cancer survivor herself. She has built a strong rapport with so many oncology and hematology patients. Her commitment to her patients' care motivates her to be at work every day. Her determination to overcome and beat cancer also helped to inspire and encourage the patients we serve.

As cliché as it may sound, Kelly is the first nurse to arrive and the last nurse to leave each and every day she works. Many years ago, a retiring nurse once told me that anyone can be trained to become a nurse, but only a select few were born to become nurses. After working with Kelly for many years, I now understand how true that statement is.

Kelly goes above and beyond the basic treatment routines with her patients every day. She takes the time to hear their story, especially those whose lives have been turned upside down with the sudden diagnosis of cancer. She takes the time to listen to the patient's or family members' concerns. She helps connect many patients with public service assistance programs or organizations that may be able to assist them financially, emotionally, physically or mentally. »





From left: KELLY BRYANT, RN, and  
IDES TORRES, MLS(ASCP)

PHOTOS BY MARINA KUSHNIR





## PAYING IT FORWARD

The most amazing thing about Kelly is that she doesn't stop being a nurse when she clocks out at the end of the day. Kelly goes home to provide care to her husband as well. She is a wonderful, caring and compassionate wife and caregiver to her Vietnam War veteran husband.

Kelly was born to care and tend to people in need. She demonstrates that each and every day. She is such an amazing nurse. I wish we could clone her multiple times over. Health care across this country needs more nurses like Kelly Bryant. 🇺🇸

### TEACHING MOMENT

**As cliché as it may sound, Kelly is the first nurse to arrive and the last nurse to leave each and every day she works. Many years ago, a retiring nurse once told me that anyone can be trained to become a nurse, but only a select few were born to become nurses. After working with Kelly for many years, I now understand how true that statement is.**





From left: CLARESSA ROSACINA, M.S.N., AGNP-BCP, and  
AFTON DICKERSON, M.S.N., ACAGNP-BCP, CBCN

PHOTOS BY DIANA CHAVEZ

# A JOURNEY TOWARD HOPE

## **AFTON DICKERSON, M.S.N., ACAGNP-BCP, CBCN**

ONCOLOGY CONSULTANTS, HOUSTON, TEXAS

Written by **Claressa Rosacina, M.S.N., AGNP-BCP**, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Houston, Texas

**T**he story of how **Afton Dickerson, M.S.N., ACAGNP-BCP, CBCN**, became an oncology nurse is an inspiring one that I feel needs to be shared. She was 30 years old and the single mother of three young children when she received a diagnosis of cancer.

Just recently divorced, she had moved to a new state and did not yet have insurance coverage or a doctor. She went to a local clinic that charged discounted rates to have an exam. A nurse practitioner changed her course that day, although she did not realize it then.

The nurse practitioner performing the exam stated, “It smells like you have cancer.” Afton awaited word from the office but never heard anything.

Three months later, after getting a job with health insurance, she went to another physician. Here she was told a biopsy was needed. Three days later, she received a call from the physician's office telling her she had cancer.

Throughout her journey, she came across many nurses and nurse practitioners who changed her life for the better. Once in remission, she immediately enrolled in school to become an »



## PAYING IT FORWARD

oncology nurse. She obtained this goal and began working toward her next goal of becoming a nurse practitioner. She was able to work on the oncology floor as a patient postoperative nurse with some of the nurses who had cared for her during her journey. This was an experience that she values to this day.

She fulfilled her goal of working for The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, where she practiced for six years. She now works with Oncology Consultants, a community practice that provides affordable services to patients who need cancer treatment.

She regularly attends events in Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas, to advocate for patients with cancer. Each week after her normal workday, she volunteers at a free clinic doing breast and gynecological screenings for patients without insurance. She is president of the local Oncology Nursing Society chapter. Her goal in caring for patients is to ensure no one has to feel as hopeless as she did those three months when she waited to hear if she had cancer.

Afton is a firm believer that prevention is key, and she dedicates her time to helping screen patients. She encompasses everything it is to be an oncology nurse, and we could not be prouder to have her on our team. ■









From left: AMANDA KELM, B.S.N., RN, OCN,  
and AMY HICKS, D.N.P., RN, ACCNS-AG, NEA-BC

PHOTOS BY ERICA HASENJAGER



# BRIDGING THE GAP

## **AMANDA KELM, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

ATRIUM HEALTH LEVINE CANCER INSTITUTE, NORTH CAROLINA

Written by **Amy Hicks, D.N.P., RN, ACCNS-AG, NEA-BC**, Charlotte, North Carolina

**H**ealth care has become increasingly complex, and the care of patients with cancer is no exception. They are often seen by many different specialists and must navigate a multitude of appointments. It is also not uncommon for a patient with an oncology diagnosis to be admitted to the inpatient setting throughout their journey. Sometimes the treatment the patient needs most is radiation therapy, which is often located at an outpatient facility.

This was the case at our facility. **Amanda Kelm, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, stepped in and embarked on a new journey to oversee the navigation of inpatients in the outpatient radiation therapy center. With Amanda's previous experience as inpatient oncology nurse, she was the ideal candidate for this new role.

Amanda quickly assimilated into the radiation oncology team, taking the lead in identifying and filling the gaps. Amanda joins the providers during consultations, where she establishes a relationship with the patients. She begins the education process and answers their questions. Amanda ensures that the patient and families have her contact information and puts them at ease.

Not only does Amanda build a rapport with the patient and family, but she also assesses the patient and determines their proper mode of transportation (hospital transport, medic, critical care transport, etc.). This assessment is crucial to ensuring patient safety and consistency of care. »

## PAYING IT FORWARD

The radiation therapists and physicians rely on her expertise and knowledge of radiation therapy and acute care to ensure the patient is safely cared for during the process. Amanda also has become a resource to the inpatient nurses. She works with them to coordinate the patient's care, including the timing of medications for pain, anxiety and nausea to keep the patient as comfortable as possible during transport and treatment.

When a patient arrives in the radiation department, Amanda is the familiar face who greets them. Her presence is a comfort, and they immediately feel more at ease. She continues to answer all questions and assesses any ongoing educational needs. If the patient has any cognitive barriers, Amanda ensures she calls the family to educate and update them as well.

As the patient continues through their radiation treatment course, Amanda is there, checking on them, keeping them safe, providing emotional support and anticipating their needs.

She serves as a resource to the radiation therapists, bridging the gap for clinical questions and helping them to better care for the patient. For instance, when a new electronic medical records system brought new terminology for code status, Amanda identified this knowledge gap and educated the entire department on this critical change.

If the patient's condition changes, Amanda is the first to know and communicate it to the radiation team. If a patient improves and being discharged home, she anticipates their needs and works closely with the inpatient team to mitigate any potential delays with radiation treatments. She ensures the patient and family are clear on the plan after discharge from the hospital. She helps arrange treatments close to their home and ensures a seamless transition.

Not only does Amanda serve a vital role in navigating the care of inpatients, but she also brings such positive energy into the department. Caring for patients with cancer can take its toll on the team. Amanda is intentional in planning activities for the staff, such as bringing in fun stress relievers and creating fun holiday activities all year.

She also coordinates tours of the departments for new oncology nurses who just graduated. Through this experience, the nurses gain valuable knowledge about radiation therapy and are better able to care for their patients who are undergoing this treatment. Amanda also leads the



department's interprofessional shared governance committee where representatives from each discipline come together to make improvements in patient care and their practice environment.

Amanda is truly an extraordinary nurse. The impact she has cannot be overstated. She has forged a new role in the department that has resulted not only in improved patient safety but also improved continuity. She has bridged the gaps in a complex environment and given the team and the patients and families peace of mind that someone is there who sees the whole picture. She also finds ways beyond patient care to make the department better. I am honored to write this nomination for someone who is as deserving as Amanda. 🇺🇸





Linda Giamalva BSN RN-BC  
Transplant/Oncology/Gyn

From left: LINDA GIAMALVA, B.S.N., RN-BC, NC IV,  
and ALLEGRA JONES, M.S.N., RN, CA-SANE

PHOTOS BY SAMANTHA WILEY

# PROVIDING FOR OTHERS

## **LINDA GIAMALVA, B.S.N., RN-BC, NC IV**

UTMB HEALTH GALVESTON, GALVESTON, TEXAS

Written by **Allegra Jones, M.S.N., RN, CA-SANE**, Galveston, Texas

**I**t is a great honor to nominate **Linda Giamalva, B.S.N., RN-BC, NC IV**, for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. Linda has been a nurse for about 15 years.

In 2011, Linda and her oncology colleagues created a nonprofit organization called Hannigan's Heroes in honor of Dr. Edward Hannigan, who was a beloved gynecological oncologist at The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB). Linda wanted his name and reputation to continue to help patients with cancer. Hannigan's Heroes raises money to help patients with expenses that are not covered by insurance or for patients who do not have insurance.

Hannigan's Heroes hosts an annual event to raise funds for patients with cancer. Linda organizes and oversees all fundraising, funds and distributions. Linda also volunteers year-round to promote breast cancer awareness at UTMB.

Linda provides excellent care to all her patients and goes above and beyond to meet their needs. Each Christmas, Linda organizes Christmas stockings for all patients and their families. The stockings contain a mixture of items such as personal care items, peppermints for nausea, blankets and items to pass the time while hospitalized. »









## PAYING IT FORWARD

I have seen Linda plan birthday parties for patients, a wedding for a young patient on the unit and the last Christmas for a family. A young man received a diagnosis of lymphoma. He was planning to get married that year. Because of the constraints of his treatments and financial concerns, the couple canceled their wedding. Linda and the other nurses helped the couple plan a wedding on the unit. Linda's extraordinary compassion is palpable!

She also planned a Christmas party for a patient who had three young children and could not afford to give them a Christmas because he was hospitalized for months for cancer treatment. Linda organized a Christmas dinner and party with gifts for the children and his wife.

Linda is a blessing to all her patients and the nurses who know her, and she is very deserving of this prestigious award. 🏆





CHAPTER 2

# In Our Corner







FROM LEFT: TERESA CARRILLO and  
CARRIE WILLIAMS, M.S.N./ED, RN

PHOTO BY NATALIE MOSER

# A BEACON OF LIGHT

## **CARRIE WILLIAMS, M.S.N./ED, RN**

KECK MEDICINE OF USC, NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

Written by **Teresa Carrillo**, Costa Mesa, California

**C**arrie Williams, M.S.N./Ed, RN, was the nurse who gave me my introduction into the world of chemotherapy treatment. I was completely overwhelmed. It's difficult to digest and process a cancer diagnosis; adding cancer treatment on top of that is intense. Carrie became my safe harbor in a stormy sea. She was kind and supportive. Not only was her bedside manner incredible, but her ability to steer her patients through a rough season was lifesaving.

She has an incredible sense of humor that lightens the heaviness of the situation without disregarding the ferocity of the treatment. I knew from the get-go she would always be honest with me. Her knowledge of cancer and the various treatments is extensive, and she is always willing to share her knowledge with her patients.

It saved me in so many ways because having that direct knowledge gave me peace of mind. It also helped me to know what to expect during the most chaotic and disruptive time of my life. I knew I could ask her anything about the toxic medication she was administering to me and she would be forthright.

She had a wealth of knowledge on side effects and helpful ways to soothe and combat them. She would routinely send me home with printouts that detailed and supported all »



## IN OUR CORNER

of that valuable information. I then could consult those printouts when I was home. These printouts helped me get through some difficult times.

Carrie was there to celebrate the small and large milestones of my cancer treatment. She was there to lend support during some of the most difficult setbacks of my cancer treatment — and there were many. She has been a skilled medical professional, my confidante, an incredible supporter and a beacon of light during some of the darkest times of my life. She has been a stable force during such turbulent times. Carrie possesses the unique duality of excellent bedside manner and immense medical knowledge.

I have no doubt about her passion for oncology and her commitment to her patients. I have never felt that she wanted to be anywhere but there with her patients, guiding them through the most difficult season of their lives. She is skilled, dynamic, reliable and compassionate. And that is why I wish to nominate her for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. She deserves to be recognized for her amazing contributions and service to her patients. ■











**From left: GEORGIA SMITH, M.S.N., FNP-BC,  
and EMILY BRYANT, B.S.N., RN, CMSRN**

PHOTO BY CATHERINE DAVIS

# COMMUNICATION AND COMPASSION

## GEORGIA SMITH, M.S.N., FNP-BC

DUKE UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL, DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

Written by **Emily Bryant, B.S.N., RN, CMSRN**, Mebane, North Carolina

**G**eorgia Smith, M.S.N., FNP-BC, worked on our unit as a bedside nurse and then transitioned to become our gynecologic oncology nurse practitioner. Georgia is one of the greatest nurses I have ever known, and her impact both at the bedside and as a nurse practitioner is incredible. She provides such an above-and-beyond level of care that when she is not here, her absence is certainly felt.

Georgia's main strength is end-of-life care and explaining goals of care to patients and their families. She spends an immense amount of time with each patient, explaining things in a way that completely changes the patient's perspective for the better. Patients are able to understand the importance of comfort at the end of life, and the communication skills that Georgia uses have given countless patients a more dignified death than they would have had otherwise. Georgia takes on each patient and personally cares for them and about them. »



## IN OUR CORNER

Georgia also makes a significant impact on quality improvement here at Duke. Recently, she created a communication algorithm to improve MD-to-RN communication for the night shift. She identified an area that needed improvement and took it upon herself to create a tool that benefits everyone. She always takes the initiative to ensure that her patients are getting the greatest care possible.

In my 10 years of nursing, I have never seen an advanced practice provider be more personable and care the way that Georgia does for women with gynecologic cancers. It is truly her passion, and anyone who meets her can tell. I have seen Georgia pour her heart and soul into caring for these women, and no one is more deserving of recognition for her impact on cancer care. 🇺🇸











**MYRA ESCUDERO, M.S.N., RN**

PHOTOS BY AGNE SOPYTE



# GUARDIAN ANGEL HELPS ME FOCUS

**MYRA ESCUDERO, M.S.N., RN**

MOUNT SINAI, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Written by **Dr. Thomas J. Re**, New York, New York

**T**here is never a “good” time for a diagnosis of cancer. I received my diagnosis just months after the tragic sudden death of a sibling who, at the time, was working full time to care for our elderly parents. The loss left me emotionally devastated and suddenly in the position as primary caregiver for them.

I had only recently returned to the New York area after many years overseas, specifically to assist in my parents’ care. I was readjusting to life back in the U.S. and a new and challenging job in medical research. It was not an easy time for me.

In October 2019, I showed up for my first outpatient session of intravenous chemotherapy at the Ruttenberg Treatment Center of Mount Sinai. I was a little anxious about the therapy but really didn’t have time to think about it. I was totally absorbed in thoughts about my parents’ care and my job. I remember taking my laptop computer, thinking I needed to use the time in therapy »


## IN OUR CORNER

to get some work done, and checking my cell phone connectivity to keep in touch with the “senior sitter” I hired for my time away from my parents.

I still remember when nurse **Myra Escudero, M.S.N., RN**, entered the room, smiled and introduced herself as my oncology nurse for the day. I knew that I was only one of her many patients, but she made me feel as though I had her full attention and care. Thanks to her kind demeanor and calming voice, I was suddenly able to turn off my computer, my phone and, most importantly, all of the stressful thoughts that were spinning around in my head and was able to focus on the moment.

She took the time to learn about me, my background and concerns. She patiently explained the procedure for the day. Working in the medical field, I have seen many nurses in action, but Myra was outstanding. One moment, she was very professionally following a meticulous medications preparation protocol, the next moment she was focused on putting me at ease.

She wasn't this way just at my first visit. Every time I came for therapy, even when other oncology nurses were assigned to me, she would check in with me and make sure that I was doing OK. Myra was my guardian angel.

During the following weekly chemotherapy sessions, I had the opportunity to meet other oncology nurses at Mount Sinai and must admit that they were all very professional and friendly. However, Myra was the one who helped me get through my most difficult session: my first. She also continued to show great professionalism, patience and caring whenever she has cared for me in future sessions. 







# HEALING THE MIND, BODY AND SOUL

**SOBHA AKKAR, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

CITY OF HOPE MEDICAL CENTER, DUARTE, CALIFORNIA

Written by **Narayan Ray Akkar**, Hollister, California

A cancer diagnosis is one of the most gut-wrenching pieces of news a human may receive. Until the recent past, this news meant the end of the line for the individual and often the families. Today, institutions such as City of Hope provide a glimmer of hope with cutting-edge treatments and care practices. Within the fabric of such facilities, real humans become angels; they deliver the necessary care and support to the patient with cancer and their family. The dedication of these nurses comes from education, experience and the environment.

I want to nominate an oncology nurse from City of Hope, **Sobha Akkar, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. Having observed my wife for 35 years, I can describe why she deserves this award. Allow me to list a few instances when Sobha delivered extraordinary care, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. »



From left: SOBHA AKKAR, B.S.N., RN, OCN,  
and NARAYAN RAY AKKAR

PHOTOS BY ALYSSA STEFEK

## IN OUR CORNER

Stories such as these were the topic of conversation at our dinner table throughout the pandemic (details omitted for privacy reasons). Many people died alone during the pandemic due to strict COVID-19 visitation protocols.

For a young girl dying of cancer, whose mother had other children at home to take care of, Sobha became a motherly figure. During her final moments, Sobha held her little hands in support, while the mother bid goodbye via video call. Nobody deserves to die alone.

Another one of her patients was engaged and scheduled to be married during her hospital stay. The wedding planning was already completed when the diagnosis stopped the couple in their tracks. Sobha helped her team arrange a wedding in the lobby of the hospital with complete quarantine precautions. A union of hearts could not be derailed by a pandemic.

Then there was a beautiful farewell for another woman who had exhausted all treatment options. The family, including her husband, could not bear to let her go. Sobha observed that the family was connected through music. After the patient was »







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extubated, the musician husband hummed their favorite first-date song as he played the guitar and said goodbye to his wife via a video call; the patient tightly held on to Sobha's hands and calmly took her last breath; another family member and support staff calmly witnessed the peaceful passing. With compassion and communication, a family was brought together to embrace death as a beautiful experience serenaded with music.

This story involved the parents of a young man from Asia. Sobha quickly understood their different cultural mindset; they view deadly diseases and end-of-life scenarios quite differently. Sobha adopted the parents during the length of his stay. She arranged for their accommodation, looked after their daily needs such as laundry and meals to the very end. When the patient died, she connected them with local supporters who helped transport his body to be buried in their home church. She helped the family heal by bridging the gap between cultures.

The clock continues ticking even outside work hours. Sobha volunteers time in the community, where I have witnessed seniors with various maladies come to discuss their problems. She is on speed dial (I believe) for our friends and family who want advice or need a sounding board. A compassionate healer never stops healing others.

I wondered how Sobha is able to handle these diverse situations, and so I had discussions regarding what motivates her. Her credentials include B.S.N., RN, OCN; she is an end-of-life trainer. But how did she become a *healer*? She had humble beginnings in rural India, where lessons from her traditions and nature shaped her early childhood. Later, mentoring by Catholic school nuns exposed her to the joy of serving others. This may have instilled in her a compassionate caring attitude that set her on this life mission of healing.

She developed her innate nursing skills through practicing and preaching meditation. I believe her compassion comes from her practice of the "Mind-Thoughts-Actions-Results" regimen, a holistic protocol for healing the mind, body and soul. An open and pure mind nurtures healthy positive thoughts, which in turn transform into meaningful and appropriate actions. The results of such actions are undoubtedly positive.

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Cancer treatments have advanced in the past couple of decades but there is no cure (yet). Sobha's healing regimen makes it a little easier for the patients and their families to accept the cancer diagnosis and prepare for the treatments, possible side effects and end results.

She leaves home for work with an open mind. Her associates say that every one of her interactions with patients evokes magical connections. Once connected, she is able to draw on her almost 15 years of experience with patients with cancer at City of Hope to determine the appropriate course of action. She has earned a few dozen Daisy nominations and awards. But at the end of the day, it is not these recognitions that keep her going; the positive results of her actions, for a patient or family, are a reward in itself for her.

At the end of her day at work, she manages to come home free of stress. She is proud of her day at work and never complains after a long or difficult shift. The five pillars of her strength are traditions, (lessons from) nature, education, experience and environment; these pillars shaped Sobha into a truly extraordinary healer.

Patients with cancer and their families need effective and meaningful support. At City of Hope, the end-to-end support system is unparalleled. In the cradle of such an institutional environment, Sobha is a perfect fit to practice her healing. With her selfless love and compassion, she continues to make a difference for patients with cancer and families every day.

As Sobha would often say, "We have two eyes to observe and two ears to listen, so why not use these, along with our uncluttered mind to help those in need." She is one extraordinary healer! 🇮🇳



# ONE OF A KIND, KIND TO EVERYONE

## **ANTHONY “TONY” REYNOLDS, RN**

ARH CANCER CENTER, HAZARD, KENTUCKY

Written by **Kellie Moore**, Bowling Green, Kentucky

**I**t can be said that all nurses are extraordinary. They devote their lives to healing, nurturing, soothing and supporting people at the most vulnerable points in their lives. But among this extraordinary collection of givers are singular nurses whose hearts are so pure, whose motives so genuine, that they stand above the rest like a beacon guiding the profession toward its highest order. **Anthony “Tony” Reynolds, RN**, of ARH Cancer Center is one such nurse.

His colleagues speak of him with a reverence that is full of wonder and awe. As I came to learn more about Tony, I asked his colleagues to share with me their sentiments, and I am convinced that Tony is the perfect person for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing.

“To say that Tony is an earth angel is an understatement,” Shannon Morton, RN, patient navigator at ARH Cancer Center, said. “There is no one else like him. We have a wonderful group on staff here at our cancer center in Hazard. All of them are caring, respectful, knowledgeable nurses, but Tony — there’s like an aura around him. He has a true God-given



ANTHONY "TONY" REYNOLDS, RN

PHOTO COURTESY OF APPALACHIAN REGIONAL HEALTHCARE

gift. ... It just flows out of him. It's not just what he says or what he does. He always has this love that comes out of his eyes; they twinkle."

Of course, what he does every day is above and beyond what any nurse is expected to do, and his colleagues are quick to speak of his seemingly limitless acts of kindness and devotion.

"Tony does anything and everything for our patients," Vicky Boggs, B.S.N., RN, nurse manager at ARH Cancer Center, said. "He drives them home if they need a ride and picks them up if they can't get to the clinic. He stops at the store along the way if they need a snack. He gives them his home phone number in case they have problems over the weekend. He is never rushed with patients, even though he has a million things to do." »

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She continued, “He’s smart, and his memory is incredible. He remembers patients’ birthdays, their phone numbers and the names of their husbands, wives and children. We have some 30 to 40 patients a day, so that’s no small feat. He buys patient presents for their birthdays and for Christmas and Halloween.”

Tony visits patients in hospice, and when a patient passes away — and sadly they often do — Tony attends their funerals — every single one. His colleagues estimate he’s been to hundreds of funerals in his 30-plus years as an oncology nurse.

“He never misses a funeral. Never, ever,” Shannon said. “He’s at the funeral home three or four times a week, and not just the local funeral homes but those that are five or six counties away. I’ve never seen anything like it. Last year we had a patient who knew he was going to pass away. He asked Tony if he would take his dog. Not only did Tony say yes, but he drove close to 100 miles round trip to another county to go and get the dog and bring it home with him, when he already had multiple dogs of his own.”

Many of Tony’s colleagues have been personally touched by his kindness and generosity of spirit. Anita McDaniel, RN, an oncology nurse who worked with Tony for 10-plus years, describes her experience when Tony cared for her husband after he received a diagnosis of hepatocellular carcinoma, a battle her husband lost in fall 2022.

“It’s so different being on the patient or family member side,” Anita said. “You think you’re ready to deal with cancer after working in oncology care for 41 years. You think you can handle it better than you can, but you find out you can’t handle it any better than any other family member who’s facing the loss of a loved one.”

She continued, “My husband took his diagnosis with grace and dignity, and Tony helped facilitate that acceptance. Tony was such a source of knowledge and comfort for my husband. Smart as a whip, and he made my husband feel comfortable, even at his sickest. He made him feel like it was going to be all right and helped us find peace with what we knew would be the outcome. He’s just an outstanding nurse and an amazing person.”

It’s the same scenario in Tony’s personal life, his colleagues say. They note that he’s played



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an integral role in raising his nieces and nephews, navigating their troubled times and supporting them as more of a parent than an uncle.

“There are no boundaries to what Tony gives,” Shannon said. “It’s a gift he can’t hide it. I don’t know how to put it into words. It’s an aura. It’s magical. He’s grateful to be here every day.”

*Personal statements from Tony’s colleagues at ARH Cancer Center include as follows:*

**Jamie Ashley:** “If ever there were a nurse who was sent down from heaven, it is Tony. He goes above and way beyond for his patients. ALL of the patients love him. On a personal level, I can say this, as well. When my stepmother was a patient, she always loved her Tony. He truly listens and cares and is the hardest worker I know. In my opinion, he deserves the best nursing award ever.”

**Shannon Morton, RN:** “I would love to nominate Tony for every award in life. He truly lives his life as though it is a gift for him to serve the sick to the best of his ability. He never complains nor tires of doing what he took an oath to do as a nurse many years. The man has a heart of gold!”

**Nadine Terry:** “I would love for Tony to win this award. I can honestly say he’s one of the best nurses I have ever come in contact with. Tony is the staple of this clinic. When or if he ever retires, he will be greatly missed by his co-workers and patients. He is irreplaceable!”

**Kari Combs:** “Tony is one of the best nurses I have had the privilege to work alongside of. He is extremely compassionate and kind to every patient and family member he encounters, which is exactly what it takes in this field to be one of the best. As soon as patients come through the door, they ask where Tony is. Tony always goes above and beyond. We are blessed to have him!”

**Vicky Boggs, B.S.N., RN:** “Tony is caring, dedicated, and willing to work any job needed in the clinic. He always does the little things that you would not think of to enhance the patient experience. Patients ask for him as soon as they walk in the door, and when he’s not working, they immediately ask where he is!” 🍷

# HELLO, I'M GLAD YOU CALLED

## **KIMBERLY ROSENCRANCE, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

MEMORIAL SLOAN KETTERING CANCER CENTER, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Written by **Ann Culkin, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, New York

**E**ach day we are overwhelmed with multiple modes of communication: phones we hold in our hands, headsets we wear, buds planted in our ears ... texts, audio messages, instant messages. And yet it is that one-to-one communication that allows **Kimberly Rosencrance, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, to excel as an oncology nurse.

Kim is a patient access nurse coordinator at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). She maximizes access for new/potential patients to MSKCC by using her oncology expertise and critical thinking skills to ensure appropriate resolution of all calls and requests. In her role, Kim serves as a clinical resource for the referral specialists to assure quality referrals and appropriate, timely appointments. This is all done via the telephone with patients and families seeking care at MSKCC.

Kim graduated with a Bachelor of Science in nursing and a Bachelor of Arts in psychology before joining the MSKCC family in 2003. Kim's expertise in critical care, cardiac care and oncology provided the expert knowledge and development in preparing for her role in

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patient access nursing. Kim's ability to handle sensitive and challenging patient interactions in a fast-paced environment assures patients and colleagues, as do her work ethic and discipline in providing compassionate care to all who seek her guidance.

When patients and families learn of their cancer diagnosis or spot a suspicious lesion that may be cancer, they call our oncology nurses. Kim conducts these emotionally loaded conversations with insight, expertise and listening skills to remove obstacles to the best oncology care. Kim reassures every caller that she is "really listening," often letting her silence do the heavy lifting as the patient shares their story.

As health care delivery models changed with the global pandemic, our workforce in patient access changed to a remote work setting. Kim and colleagues were now alone at their home computers handling high-volume calls for review of records and diagnosis and timely scheduling. Having necessary resources available to them and learning telehealth pathways of licensure and availability of providers were vital to the success of the organization. Kim gathered each day with her nursing colleagues in a virtual huddle to define strategy for workloads and manage resources to ensure quality care.

Kim consistently advocates for patients with highly complex issues related to their disease. She also communicates with our referral specialists for optimal insurance coverage and out-of-network authorization details while keeping the focus on the patient and helping to lessen the financial toxicity that a cancer diagnosis can cause.

Patients write compliments about Kim such as, "She created a calm, peaceful setting for a stressful time, she answered all my questions." Another patient's family member who worked with Kim said she was "very helpful, very professional, very patient."

Listening to the call interaction, you will often hear patients thanking Kim. Recently a colleague who is now a patient shared, "I felt a huge weight lift off my shoulder just by talking to Kim. She was like a partner in this process."

Kim's nursing colleagues shared similar sentiments. One writes, "I have had the good fortune of being oriented to this role by Kim. She is thorough, thoughtful and kind almost to »



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a fault. In training with her I had the opportunity to listen in on several conversations where she delivered disappointing news in the most comforting manner and good news with joy that you can hear. I still pause in moments of indecision and ask, ‘What would Kim do?’”

Another colleague writes, “Sometimes patients need to talk to someone who is really listening, because in this remote setting we never lay eyes or hands on the patients. Kim listens and cares ... That is a true oncology nurse.”

Memorial Sloan Kettering is a community of exceptional people united by a clear single-minded purpose: conquering cancer. Patients and families are the center of what we do, every day in every way. Her focused assessments and psychosocial care facilitate engagement for patients and families filled with anxiety and uncertainty.

Advocacy, care, concern, empathy and kindness are the feelings experienced when calling Kim for access to care. Kim is celebrated in the ever-changing landscape of oncology care, which truly makes her an extraordinary healer. 📌

### TEACHING MOMENT

**Kim conducts these emotionally loaded conversations with insight, expertise and listening skills to remove obstacles to the best oncology care. Kim reassures every caller that she is “really listening,” often letting her silence do the heavy lifting as the patient shares their story.**









## CHAPTER 3

# Incomparable Compassion





From left: MISSY BEAN TANNER, RN,  
and PAMELA FIELDS

PHOTOS BY SEAN GASSER

# MAKING MAGIC HAPPEN

## **MISSY BEAN-TANNER, RN**

TULANE CANCER CENTER, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Written by **Pamela Fields**, Buras, Louisiana

**M**issy Bean-Tanner, RN, is part of the Tulane Cancer Center's oncology unit in the infusion department. The first time you meet her, you feel her calming presence and you see her beautiful smile. During an uncertain time, she brings inner peace and reassurance. She will jump into anything if she knows it will help her patients.

Prior to my initial chemotherapy session, Missy learned that I was going to arrive dressed up as Wonder Woman. My first introduction was seeing her dressed as Wonder Woman as a show of support. For the next seven treatments, she coordinated her Tuesday with the costume of the day. Costumes were the way I chose to go through treatments. If I didn't give her a heads up, she would ask what the costume was so she'd be ready too. »



## INCOMPARABLE COMPASSION

A cancer diagnosis and chemo can be pretty scary, but with someone like Missy, you become braver than you thought you could be. She is with her patients through treatments, cheers them on, makes sure that they are as good as they can be and celebrates when you get to ring your final bell.

Missy is truly an angel on earth. Day in and day out, she shows up with a beautiful smile and a calm spirit. This would not be possible without the deep faith that she has. Missy is passionate about her family, faith and health. She participates in half marathons across the U.S. regularly with her girlfriends. Hearing the stories of her family, her husband the pastor and her son's accomplishments as well as her races, you can't help but be inspired by her. The love that she has for all of them is evident.

If you were to ask any of her current or past patients, they would reinforce these words. We may have met as nurse and patient, but now she is a friend. The world needs more people like Missy to guide patients through cancer care, but also to remind them that during what could be a difficult time, there are always angels along the way to light your path.

I would like to nominate Missy Bean-Tanner for being an extraordinary healer and angel on earth. 🇺🇸







# THE MAGNIFICENT 'MOM'

## **KRISTEN MITCHELL, A.D.N.**

ASCENSION VIA CHRISTI CANCER CENTER, PITTSBURG, KANSAS

Written by **Marcus Yoakam, B.S.N., RN, ONS**, Pittsburg, Kansas

I would like to nominate my co-worker, **Kristen Mitchell, A.D.N.**, for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing.

Kristen, or “Mom,” as I affectionately call her, is the epitome of what every oncology nurse should strive to be. I have met and interacted with a countless number of nurses, but Kristen stands a head above the rest (despite being 5 feet, 3 inches tall). Kristen is always there to help when we are slammed and actively goes out of her way to help everyone.

In addition to being incredibly helpful, her clinical skills are second to none. It's a well-known fact that when there's a tricky intravenous draw or port, “Mom” is the first one to call if we fall short. It is a great comfort to know that we have such a reliable and competent colleague in Kristen.

And although she is an exceptional nurse, Kristen's most admirable trait, without a doubt, is her compassion. Kristen cares more than just about anyone I have ever met. She could be monitoring three patients on chemotherapy and drawing labs while answering the phone and still find time to give a patient a hug or an extra blanket.



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Kristen is the type of positive tour de force that any cancer center would be lucky to have. She radiates kindness and exudes thoughtfulness. She is always the first to ask how patients are feeling before treatment and the last person the patient talks to before they leave. Her involvement in a patient's treatment is a godsend to many of our patients who don't have much support; she becomes like family to them.

Kristen is also an ardent patient advocate. If a patient ever feels any sort of uncertainty and is afraid to talk to the doctor, Kristen takes charge and makes sure the doctor is aware of the patient's concerns. She is always putting the patient's desires first and has a deep respect for their autonomy.

It is my firm belief that working as an oncology nurse is a privilege. In this profession, we are lucky enough to walk alongside people during, arguably, the most difficult time in their lives. I can say without hesitation that there is no nurse other than Kristen that I would want walking by me if I were a patient.

It is difficult to put into words the positive impact she has on everyone around her, but you can see the patient's eyes light up when they see her. You can see their smiles. You can see that they feel at ease. This is the "Kristen effect" and it is why I would like to nominate her for this award. Every cancer center in the U.S. should be so lucky to have a Kristen on their team. All considered, please accept my nomination of Kristen for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. 🇺🇸



From left: MARCUS YOAKAM, B.S.N., RN, ONS, and KRISTEN MITCHELL, A.D.N.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY MARCUS YOAKAM B.S.N., RN, ONS





From left: MEGHA SHAH, B.S.N., RN, OCN, and  
LYNDA RICE

PHOTOS BY ARIELLE GALLIONE

# FINDING PEACE AMID THE FEAR

**MEGHA SHAH, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

NORTHWESTERN MEDICINE, GENEVA, ILLINOIS

Written by **Lynda Rice**, Batavia, Illinois

**O**n February 20, 2021, during a self-examination, I discovered a lump in my right breast and it stopped me in my tracks. I had undergone yearly scans and ultrasounds that revealed nothing of significance, and I'd had one done just two months before.

Three weeks later, I received a diagnosis of breast cancer. I was 52 years old and could not believe this was happening to me. My life was already on overload. My husband was disabled and had a host of medical issues, including Parkinson's disease. My 23-year-old son with autism was starting college in the fall. My oldest son and his wife were living in Tennessee. My 90-year-old father was also battling Parkinson disease. My beautiful mother had passed away in 2019 from lymphoma. To make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic was still in motion, and no one knew what direction it was going.

I was stricken with thoughts of despair and did not know how I would handle all of this essentially alone. There was no one at home to help me, and I had to be my husband's caretaker. I was supposed to be the one taking care of everyone, and everything felt so uncertain. »



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As anyone with cancer will tell you, initially there is no good news. There is an overwhelming flurry of appointments with doctors, technicians and labs. I had no one physically with me due to the pandemic. I felt like I was in a tunnel with no end, but I just kept moving.

Then it was time to start chemotherapy, which was terrifying. It was the poison that was going to run through my body for hours, damage many things in its path and make me sicker than I ever thought possible. However, it was going to be the thing that would help me live. I heard many horrific stories of reactions to chemotherapy, and now it was my turn. I did not want to start. I was not mentally strong enough. I needed my mother so much I could hardly breathe.

When I walked into the Northwestern Medicine Cancer Center Delnor to begin chemotherapy, I felt like I was floating. The treatment rooms were beautiful and friendly faces surrounded me, but I just could not believe this was happening. I was put in a room for what they told me could be up to eight hours.

Everything was hitting me all at once, and then it happened: **Megha Shah, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, walked into the room, and I found complete peace in her smile. It felt warm and compassionate and made me feel secure. She pulled up a chair next to me, sat down and told me in the most reassuring, gentle voice that we would take it one step at a time. My fear literally drifted away, and I finally felt my feet on the ground.

Megha spoke softly and calmly and explained the treatment I was going to receive, why she was wearing protective gear, what the beeps were on the machines, what a “check” was, what drug was going in and for how long. I never — not once — felt scared after I met her.

We were off on this adventure together, and I trusted her every step of the way. I had an

## INCOMPARABLE COMPASSION

amazing sense of security knowing I would see her during treatments. Regardless of the fears or questions I had, she never made me feel rushed or that I was imposing upon her. She has been a fount of knowledge. She would bring me snacks, water and warm blankets.

Significantly, in spite of my anxiety and anguish, she has made me laugh. Megha knew what I needed before I needed it. She was my rock. She held me up when I felt broken, and I trusted her with my tears when I was vulnerable.

Peaceful is the only word to describe my visits with her. Megha showed me kindness and compassion in so many little ways she probably doesn't even realize. It was everything from bringing me something to drink, to her laugh, to counting before she put the needle in my port, to sitting next to me for a few minutes and asking how I really was.

My life at home was very complicated, so cancer wasn't the only thing I was juggling. Megha reminded me, however, that even though I had all that happening, I had to take care of myself. I had to make myself a priority, and that was essential to my recovery. Megha gave me something no one did through this ordeal — she made me feel important. I was surrounded by so many people in my life who needed something from me that I didn't have the strength to give. But for a few hours every three weeks I was important. It was about me. She brightened my day, made me feel that I was surviving and that it was all going to be OK. She brought me an inner peace I didn't know I was missing.

I am nominating Megha Shah for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. She not only manifests the traits and knowledge required in her profession, but she does so with an abundance of heart and kindness. Simply stated, she is amazing. She has taught me volumes about compassion and vulnerability. She is dedicated to helping patients with cancer. She takes great pride in her work, and she is exceptional. She lifted me up so many times, I lost count. I will never know how to properly thank her.

Even though I have finished treatment, I can honestly say that I am grateful that because of this horrible disease Megha came into my life. When I reflect on my cancer journey, I feel a rush of peace come over me and warm me because of the care and kindness she gave me. It is an amazing feeling. Megha deserves to be honored with the Extraordinary Healer Award because she is extraordinary. I am so blessed that she was my nurse. 🇮🇳



**From left: KIRSTIN HETTINGER, B.S.N., RN,  
OCN, and AMY NOE, B.S.N., RN**

PHOTOS BY BENHUR AYETTEY



# THE NURSE WHO RADIATES POSITIVITY

## **KIRSTIN HETTINGER, B.S.N., RN, OCN**

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER – THE JAMES CANCER  
HOSPITAL AND SOLOVE RESEARCH INSTITUTE, COLUMBUS, OHIO

Written by **Amy Noe, B.S.N., RN**, Columbus, Ohio

**I**t is with immense pleasure we submit this letter to recommend **Kirstin Hettinger, B.S.N., RN, OCN**, for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing. Kirstin has dedicated her nursing practice the past eight years to caring for patients with acute leukemia. When reading the nomination criteria for this award, Kirstin immediately came to mind for her unwavering positivity, compassion and expertise. I had the privilege of working alongside Kirstin and have witnessed the extraordinary care, hope and healing she provides to her patients and their loved ones as a bedside oncology nurse.

The diagnosis of acute leukemia is very unexpected and for many an area of complete unknown. Many individuals who receive a diagnosis of leukemia were living life as normal »

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the month before, the week before and, in some cases, even the day before they are admitted and start treatment. The nurse is the first point of contact for this fearful patient.

Imagine you just received a diagnosis of leukemia; you have no idea what the next steps will be or what your future holds, but you're greeted with a smile from a nurse who reassures you that "You are in the right place, and we will help you through everything." That extraordinary nurse is Kirstin.

Kirstin is the nurse who meets each patient with a smile and puts them and their families at ease with her presence. The expert leukemia nurse plays a critical role in the patient's ability to understand, adapt and successfully manage how they are feeling physically and emotionally from initial diagnosis through treatment. I have witnessed Kirstin's ability to use her expertise and compassion to guide a newly diagnosed patient through their treatment process as if they were her family or friend.

Kirstin provides high-level, compassionate care with a holistic approach, which is incredibly important for patients with acute leukemia because of their extended hospital stays. Treatment requires four six-week »







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stays, which are often extended due to complications. Kirstin provides healing and hope to patients with cancer and their loved ones. She has the uncanny ability to treat all individuals as if they are her family. She is open and honest with her patients; she meets them at their level and always provides care guided in compassion and empathy.

Nurse colleague Erin Bennett, M.S.N., RN, OCN, SNIV, shares, “Kirstin Hettinger is by far one of the best, most well-rounded nurses I have ever had the pleasure of working with. She goes above and beyond for both patients and her colleagues. Her expertise personally molded me into the nurse I am today, and for that I am eternally grateful. Kirstin is approachable, kind and always willing to lend a helping hand. There is something special about Kirstin that always makes it feel as though she cares about you like you are her own family, whether you are a patient or colleague.

“Whether a patient is newly diagnosed, in active treatment or transitioning to end of life, Kirstin’s compassion and empathetic nature provides comfort and understanding to the patients. She is always the first nurse to sit down with the patient and their families to embrace difficult conversations together. She goes above and beyond to help the patients and family members gain a better understanding of their diagnosis and what to expect. She instills hope, while also providing realistic expectations.”

Kirstin has unwavering and palpable positivity. She comes to work with this each day and immediately has an impact on the unit dynamic. She serves on shared governance councils, is a charge nurse and is one of our unit’s most-requested nursing preceptors. Kirstin has precepted countless new graduate nurses during her career and is always embracing this role as she helps new staff assimilate into the unit culture.


Kirstin has persevered through the COVID-19 pandemic through staffing impacts and changes while never losing her innate ability to bring positivity to an interaction with patients, family members and her colleagues. Kirstin’s passion of caring for patients with leukemia radiates throughout the individualized care she provides them.

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From nurse colleague Michelle Orovets, M.S.N., RN, OCN: “Kirstin’s expertise in caring for the acute leukemia population is so great that I found myself listening to her teach new graduate nurses and learning something new often, while simply enjoying hearing her teaching methods. New graduate nurses are ensured a better understanding of critical thinking, time management and true empathy for patients by having Kirstin as their preceptor.”

Nurse colleague Danielle Dunnington, RN, OCN, explains: “Kirstin’s expertise on our unit has always been an extremely valuable resource, but during the past few years, when we have seen changes in nursing such as nurses transitioning from the bedside, it truly has kept our unit running. She shares her knowledge while training new staff and has also been a unit resource we rely on. Kirstin is the nurse everyone hopes to have by their side when they are working.”

Nurse practitioner Donica Truitt, M.S.N., APRN-CNP, shares: “Many patients with leukemia require monthlong hospital stays, which push our patients to their mental and physical limits, which Kirstin takes into consideration with her practice. Her positive, radiant personality instantly puts her patients at ease. She provides reassurance, instills confidence and acts as a coach with little effort, because it is second nature to her. Despite increased nursing responsibilities over the past couple of years, I have seen Kirstin continue to provide the same level of high-quality care and dedication no matter how busy she may be.”

We hope you consider Kirstin Hettinger, B.S.N., RN, OCN, for the Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing because she truly embodies the qualities of expertise, compassion and helpfulness each day in her nursing practice. Kirstin, even in times of struggle, uses her innate positive nature to move herself and others forward. I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this honor than Kirstin. 





From left: LORI SHATTUCK, RN, OCN, and  
KATHY SHINE, B.S.N., RN

PHOTOS BY AZULA RAUN



# COMPASSION THROUGH KINDNESS

## **KATHY SHINE, B.S.N., RN**

IRONWOOD CANCER & RESEARCH CENTERS, CHANDLER, ARIZONA

Written by **Lori Shattuck, RN, OCN**, Chandler, Arizona

**O**ur mission statement here at Ironwood is “Compassion Through Kindness.” **Kathy Shine, B.S.N., RN**, demonstrates this every day with the quality care she provides to our patients and how she treats staff members. She is also celebrating her 41st year of nursing and will celebrate her 20th year with Ironwood Cancer & Research Centers in November 2023.

Kathy is a faithful servant leader. In her time with Ironwood, she has worn many hats, including being a nurse manager at our busiest clinic. I admired Kathy’s leadership style so much that when she decided to step down from the nurse manager title a few years ago, I was motivated to step up to leadership myself. I wanted to be like her. She may have given up the title but is still a leader in our practice in every way at Ironwood. »

## INCOMPARABLE COMPASSION

She mentors and leads by example with how she treats others and the excellent care she provides patients. Kathy is uniquely able to stay calm in all situations, which ripples out to others when she is around. She is respectful, patient and kind to all. She often brings flowers and special treats to the nurse station, which puts smiles on the faces of others and helps brighten even the most stressful days.

When you walk into the infusion room, it is evident that Kathy's passion is caring for our patients. She is often seen at a patient's chairside, smiling, going beyond standard assessments, taking her time to get to know them and asking about family and recent events. She truly listens to her patients and advocates for them when needed. Patients often compliment her on what a fantastic nurse she is.

She cares about her patients as a whole person, treating them with dignity and respect while always providing excellent care. An example of her compassion is the care she provided recently for a married couple who had a difficult time during cancer treatment. Kathy was always willing to stop what she was doing to listen and be a shoulder to cry on. The husband recently passed away, yet Kathy remains a positive light during a dark time for the patient's wife and family.

Kathy deserves all these praises and more. She is a true pillar of our practice, the community, our patients and all the staff members. We greatly appreciate her expert skill and compassion. 🍷







# IRONWOOD CANCER & RESEARCH CENTERS





# COMBINING TEACHING WITH COMPASSION

## JESSICA SMITH, B.S.N., RN, OCN

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER – THE JAMES CANCER  
HOSPITAL AND SOLOVE RESEARCH INSTITUTE , COLUMBUS, OHIO

Written by **Amy Tootle, M.S., B.S.N., RN**, Logan, Ohio

**J**essica Smith, B.S.N., RN, OCN, has been an oncology nurse for 27 years. Jessica began her career on our blood and marrow transplant (BMT) unit and continues to provide personalized, compassionate care to her patients as a direct care oncology nurse.

I am her nurse manager, and I have known Jessica since 2011 when I was a direct care oncology nurse. At that time, she was my nurse preceptor. Jessica is professional, knowledgeable and efficient. She serves numerous roles in BMT. She is a preceptor to new staff, she is a charge nurse, and she serves on a shared governance council. Jessica maintains her professional oncology certification and her nursing clinical ladder.

As a preceptor to new nurses, Jessica consistently goes above and beyond to provide concise, comprehensible oncology education to new team members. Jessica gives honest, in-the-moment feedback to her peers to provide an open-communication environment.



From left: AMY TOOTLE, M.S., B.S.N., RN, and JESSICA SMITH, B.S.N., RN, OCN

PHOTO PROVIDED BY AMY TOOTLE, M.S., B.S.N., RN

She answers questions and provides opportunities to new team members using innovative, thoughtful instruction. Jessica has a spirit of inquiry and frequently reaches out to the advanced practice provider, attending physician, clinical nurse specialist, clinical trial teams or nursing leadership to find the answers to her questions. Jessica is compassionate and caring, and she strives for high-quality patient outcomes. Jessica continually has conversations with the members of the health care team and provides solutions when patient care challenges arise. She is known for expertly searching for policies, clinical guidelines and unit-specific standards.

Jessica has served on numerous shared governance committees over the years and currently serves on the patient care council. As a council member, Jessica serves as the nurse assigned to the BMT unit to complete skin prevalence rounds, a nurse-led assessment of our »

## INCOMPARABLE COMPASSION

patient's skin status. Jessica approaches every patient during these rounds and immediately helps them feel comfortable with the assessment process. She engages with compassion and a healing attitude as she ensures the unit is providing the best care possible.

Jessica has created a group education class for central venous catheter line teaching to all patients and caregivers. This two-hour, hands-on class involves step-by-step line care instruction and demonstration. Jessica schedules time beyond her regular work hours to engage and support patient care and education endeavors.

Jessica is passionate about communicating best practices and advances in skill competence to provide the best nursing care. She constantly engages in new learning opportunities and educational experiences to have a better understanding of the ever-changing world of patient care. As I reflect on the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past few years, I am grateful for Jessica's willingness to assist her team, her steadfast support of colleagues, and her unwavering dependability and focus on patients.

Jessica is an excellent resource who is committed to increasing her knowledge of the nursing profession. Jessica is invested in the success of each of the new employees that she precepts. She is optimistic, confident and a great listener. She often gives employees and patients an outlet to express their fears, frustrations, anxieties and successes. Her positive attitude offers motivation for new employees to excel.

Jessica excels at providing holistic care to provide health and healing to the complex patients on the BMT unit. Jessica exemplifies our framework for nursing practice, Relationship-Based Care, by caring for the patients and family members, her colleagues, herself and her community. Jessica is known as the expert on the BMT unit. Her peers ask for her guidance and feedback. Her patients are comforted by her knowledge and insistence on nursing excellence. Jessica instills hope within her patients by providing personalized patient care with a calm, caring character. Jessica's self-awareness, excellent communication skills and willingness to help others build trust with her patients and their family members.

I'm proud to have Jessica on my team! 🍓









# List of All 2023 Nominees





## NOMINEES

**Sobha Akkar, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Duarte, California

**Anica Bausch, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Madison, Wisconsin

**Missy Bean-Tanner, RN**  
New Orleans, Louisiana

**Patricia Jo Beaty, M.P.H., RN**  
Canton, Ohio

**Gailine Boice, RN, OCN**  
Mesa, Arizona

**Kelly Bryant, RN**  
Orange Park, Florida

**Mary Colasuonno, B.S.N.,  
RN, BMTCN**  
Duarte, California

**Beatriz "Betty" Cortes Garcia, RN**  
Eureka, California

**Afton Dickerson, M.S.N., RN,  
ACNP-BCP**  
Houston, Texas

**Pam Dowling, B.S.N., RN**  
St. Louis, Missouri

**Myra Escudero, M.S.N., RN**  
New York, New York

**Terry Fogaren, NP**  
Boston, Massachusetts

**Melissa Fuentes, RN, OCN**  
Deland, Florida

**Marcia Gaulke, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Atlanta, Georgia

**Caitlyn Geer, B.S.N., RN, CNII**  
Commack, New York

**Linda Giamalva, B.S.N., RN-BC,  
NC IV**  
Galveston, Texas

**Sheila Goodwin, CMA (AAMA)**  
Kettering, Ohio

**Kirstin Hettinger, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Columbus, Ohio

**Traci Jakovljevic, B.S.N., RN**  
Mayfield Heights, Ohio

**Abbey Kaler, M.S., APRN, FNP-C,  
CMSRN, Ph.D. Student**  
Houston, Texas

**Amanda Kelm, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Charlotte, North Carolina

**Danielle Kyrillidis, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
East Hills, New York

**Joan Livingstone, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Detroit, Michigan

**Deborah Lorick, M.S.N./MHA,  
CMSRN, OCN**  
Lancaster, California

**Carrie McMichael, RN, OCN, CRNI**  
Oceanside, New York

**Kristen Mitchell, A.D.N.**  
Pittsburg, Kansas

**Tiffani Morgan, B.S.N., RN**  
Roseville, California

**Kerry O'Neill, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Irvine, California

**Jennifer Pagan-Negron, RN**  
Elyria, Ohio

**Anthony "Tony" Reynolds, RN**  
Hazard, Kentucky

**Mayori A. Rodriguez, B.S.N., RN**  
Doral, Florida

**Kimberly Rosencrance, B.S.N.,  
RN, OCN**  
New York, New York

**Megha Shah, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Geneva, Illinois

**Kathy Shine, B.S.N., RN**  
Chandler, Arizona

**Georgia Smith, M.S.N., FNP-BC**  
Durham, North Carolina

**Jessica Smith, B.S.N., RN, OCN**  
Columbus, Ohio

**Michelle Taylor, NP**  
Phoenix, Arizona

**Rachel Thatcher, RN**  
Cleveland, Ohio

**Sara White, APRN-CNS, AOCNS**  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

**Carrie Williams, M.S.N./Ed, RN**  
Newport Beach, California

*CURE* combines science with humanity to empower patients with cancer and their caregivers by offering the latest information on every aspect of the disease, from the technical and scientific to the social and emotional.

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**Oncology**    
**NURSINGNEWS**®



**Extraordinary Healer®: CURE® Readers Honor Oncology Nurses Volume 17** is a collection of inspiring essays written by patients, survivors, caregivers and colleagues about the oncology nurses who touch lives while caring for those affected by cancer. These essays offer lessons about healing in the face of adversity, persevering against the odds, and discovering that kindness and compassion can be part of top-notch cancer care.

**"She has bridged the gaps in a complex environment and given the team and the patients and families peace of mind that someone is there who sees the whole picture. She also finds ways beyond patient care to make the department better."**

*— ABOUT AN EXTRAORDINARY HEALER FROM CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA*

**"I knew that I was only one of her many patients, but she made me feel as though I had her full attention and care. Thanks to her kind demeanor and calming voice, I was suddenly able to turn off my computer, my phone and, most importantly, all of the stressful thoughts that were spinning around in my head and was able to focus on the moment."**

*— ABOUT AN EXTRAORDINARY HEALER FROM NEW YORK, NEW YORK*

**"(She) is the type of positive tour de force that any cancer center would be lucky to have. She radiates kindness and exudes thoughtfulness. She is always the first to ask how patients are feeling before treatment and the last person the patient talks to before they leave. Her involvement in a patient's treatment is a godsend to many of our patients."**

*— ABOUT AN EXTRAORDINARY HEALER FROM PITTSBURG, KANSAS*