From Patient to Patient Advisor

By Valerie Colangelo

In 2008, in my mid-twenties, I experienced a Lupus flare that attacked my kidneys, as well as Guillain-Barre Syndrome, which left me almost completely paralyzed and on life support within a few weeks. I spent six months away from home, bouncing between The Valley Hospital, two rehabilitation settings, and an acute-care facility to literally get on my feet again. My rehabilitation included two-and-a-half years of chemotherapy at Luckow – first monthly, then quarterly – to keep the Lupus from attacking my kidneys. (I continue to see my doctors every few months for monitoring.)

My family was vital in my recovery; they became daily fixtures in my room, and the staff let them participate in my care. We are more than our bodies, and having my family welcomed as part of my healthcare team helped my mind and emotional well-being as much as the machines that were keeping my body going.

It was a long and hard road. I couldn’t go back to work, couldn’t get on long-term disability, and was just getting by on food stamps. There was a hospital bed in the middle of my dining room because I couldn’t get upstairs to my own bedroom, and each morning I would spread the piles of medical bills out on it and spend the day battling them on the phone.

In spite of this, and being unable to return to my physically demanding career, I wanted to at least give back to Valley for the incredible and unparalleled care I received, so I started to volunteer and tell my story. After sitting on committees as the first patient advisor, I was offered a consulting position, through which I can use my stories and experiences to educate the staff in Patient and Family Centered Care.

Although I never want to go what I went through ever again, I’m thankful for having had this experience, which has given my life new direction thanks to the compassionate staff. Compassion is key, as I tell patients and staff alike; a smile is just good medicine for all of us. Keep a smile handy in your heart.

Pet Therapy: Lending a Helping Paw

You may have noticed some four-legged friends roaming the halls of the Blumenthal Cancer Center and The Valley Hospital. These special friends are part of Valley’s Pet Therapy program, in which specially trained volunteers and their dogs visit with patients and their families.

Pet therapy has been shown to have a positive effect on patients. Last year, researchers at Mount Sinai Beth Israel in New York found that therapy dogs boosted the emotional well-being and quality of life of patients undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatment. The presence of the dogs lowered patients’ anxiety levels and encouraged patients to continue their treatments.

The next time you see a therapy dog at the hospital or Blumenthal Cancer Center, stop by and say hello. You’ll be glad you did!
Support Corner

Local Resources for Patients and Survivors

We are grateful to have so many wonderful organizations and programs available to patients and survivors right in our own backyard. These programs seek to empower and enrich the lives of those who have been touched by cancer. Best of all, they’re free!

• **Living Strong, Living Well**: A 12-week exercise program designed for cancer patients and survivors to improve overall physical well-being during and after treatment. Offered at the Ridgewood YMCA. 201-444-5600, ext. 330 (Carol Livingstone)

• **Look Good, Feel Better**: A program from the American Cancer Society, designed for women dealing with hair loss and skin changes from chemotherapy and radiation. Learn specific techniques to help make the most of your appearance while undergoing treatment. 1-800-227-2345

• **Kula for Karma Yoga**: This program is taught by certified yoga instructors with advanced cancer training. Gentle yoga includes restorative and adaptive techniques, which focus on stress reduction and relaxation. Participants will explore yoga as a pathway toward healing on all levels. 201-634-5325 (Denise DeVries)

• **CancerCare (www.cancercare.org)**: Services include individual counseling (face-to-face and telephone); support groups (face-to-face, online and telephone); educational publications and workshops (telephone); financial assistance; and free wigs. All services are provided by professional oncology social workers and are available for the whole family. 141 Dayton St. #204, Ridgewood; 201-444-6630 or 1-800-813-4673.

**We Want to Hear from You!**

Got an inspiring story or helpful tip to share? Let us know, and it may appear in our next edition of *Cancer Creates*! Email submissions to sardito@valleyhealth.com.

**There's More Online**

Visit valleyhealthcancercenter.com and click on “For Patients & Families,” then “Cancer Creates Newsletter,” to find current and previous issues of *Cancer Creates*.

---

Cancer Survivorship Series

**Thriving Through and Beyond Cancer**

The Cancer Survivorship Series is an ongoing series that educates, informs and empowers patients to better manage their health and enhance their quality of life during and after cancer treatment. Workshops are held at the Blumenthal Cancer Center in the Luckow Pavilion, 1 Valley Health Plaza, Paramus. Space is limited; to register, please call Brooke Laster, LCSW, at 201-634-5787, or email blaster@valleyhealth.com.

**Stress Management for Survivors**

*Tuesday, August 2, 6–7:30 p.m.*

Maria Mazzer, R.N., integrative healing nurse, will share different techniques to help participants explore ways to cope with stress.

---

**Reducing Anxiety with Mindfulness**

*By Valerie Quigley, B.S.N., R.N., O.C.N., Infusion Center Manager*

Over the last few years, I have heard the word mindfulness often. But what does it really mean, and how can we best use it?

At the Integrative Healing Arts Academy, I learned the importance of simply stopping and taking a few deep breaths. This helps me to focus, clear my thoughts and embrace the moment. I also learned to be mindful of the moment while doing other things, like listening to the sound of the water while I wash my hands.

Now, our group wondered how we could bring mindfulness to our patients. New patients are fearful, and while fear is essential for survival it also produces worry and stress, which are barriers to the learning and healing process.

We focused on a practice called “Commit to Sit.” During this practice, the nurse introduces herself to her patient and explains that together they can begin by taking three slow, deep breaths. This promotes relaxation for both the nurse and patient while allowing for a better learning environment. The nurse also sits down next to the patient while doing her assessment and teaching. This fosters a one-to-one connection between nurse and patient and allows the nurse to give her undivided attention to her patient.

Our results and feedback have been very positive, and we’re attempting to bring this mindfulness process to other areas of the hospital.