

# Meeting of the Minds

A lifelong personal and professional relationship

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**T**he old adage “meeting of the minds” is always an exciting and motivating experience. I only wish that every healthcare provider could share this type of encounter in his or her professional career. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to meet Renee almost 20 years ago when we were both assigned to facilitate a metastatic breast cancer support group. Her role was the clinical social worker, and mine was to provide knowledge and education as the oncology educator. We were a fabulous team; not only did we connect with the patients, provide emotional support, clarify misconceptions, and create a safe, open environment, but we also started a lifelong professional and personal friendship.

Throughout the years, we worked together with countless patients, shared an office at one point, and talked both on and off the organization’s time clock. In 2013, she was instrumental in assisting me in making one of the most difficult, anxiety-provoking decisions of my life. My grandmother, mother, and sister were all diagnosed with breast cancer, and I needed to consider having a bilateral mastectomy. My supportive friend helped me by listing all the pros and cons and listened to my concerns repeatedly. Finally, in July of that year, I had the surgery. You will never guess who the first person was to visit me in the recovery room. Yes, of course, it was Renee, my dear special friend and colleague. It was so comforting to wake up and see her face. She held my hand and made me laugh (which was great for the heart and soul but not so pleasant for my chest). In any event, I knew that I

had made the right choice and was grateful for her presence, friendship, and patience.

Fast forward to a year later. I received a frantic call from Renee, saying, “Meet me in my office ASAP,” then she hung up

could not just stay home. She would often say, “I just have to keep moving.”

After her bilateral mastectomies and reconstruction, I became her unofficial homecare nurse, changing dressings,

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abruptly. This behavior was clearly out of character, and I was concerned and befuddled. I left my desk, ran down the stairs, and burst into her office. I found her calmly sitting behind her disorganized but organized desk, which was always a source of comedy. My friend stood up, closed the door, and looked directly into my eyes and said, “Well, my friend, I have the big C.” I was paralyzed and speechless. I have supported numerous patients and families through a cancer diagnosis, but this I could not believe. As healthcare providers, particularly in oncology, we like to think we will be exempt from the disease; sadly, that is never the case. From this moment on, breast cancer was our indelible bond.

She underwent neoadjuvant chemotherapy, and, during her treatments, I would take lunch breaks and visit her in the chemotherapy room. We would laugh, cry, and talk about the future. My friend had the most unbelievable willpower. She never missed a day of work, and her motivation was that her patients needed her, and she

monitoring drains, and providing emotional support. Our bond during this time was strengthened, and I tried my best to be in nurse mode and professional, although, on the inside, my heart was breaking for my dear friend. Many times, she would grab my hand, look at me, and say, “Are you OK? I know this is hard for you.” I would smile and say, “Stop thinking about me, and let’s focus on you getting back to action.” Our moment was over, and we resumed the task at hand. The encounters were always positive, with the focus being on returning to normal functioning as quickly as possible. During the visits, I had the pleasure of spending time with her beautiful adult children and amazing husband, as well as her extended family. Renee had a huge presence in her temple and community. There was always someone at the house, able to assist and bring the most delicious breakfast treats.

At times, the visits were bittersweet because she would introduce me as her personal oncology nurse and dearest

friend. We would all chuckle, and then she would say in jest, “She will be my hospice nurse when the time comes.” My response was always strong and curt: “Stop that talk. We are nowhere near that time.”

Her battle was arduous. She relapsed after one year, and after each treatment, a new site of disease would be identified. However, her will and ability to never give up were unprecedented. There were days I do not even know how she made it out of bed, let alone get dressed and get ready to work, always thinking about her patients and the team.

In 2016, she made the decision to travel as much as possible. Side effects and all, she traveled to Israel, Spain, Italy, Germany, and California. Everyone was in awe of her determination and ability to enjoy every trip, despite the painful neuropathy and unsteady gait. Her daughter, who traveled along, would send pictures, and she was beaming with joy and happiness.

In 2017, the breast cancer spread to the brain; unfortunately, this was her worst fear. My friend was also a realist. She was extremely bright and knew, in her heart, that she was nearing the end. However, she made the decision to try every possible treatment. We would share many

nights talking and laughing, but she would hardly cry. She would say, “We don’t have time to cry.” One week before her birthday, she was unable to continue working. We did not even have time to have a retirement dinner; we had a birthday party in the cancer center while she was on the stretcher. Her family and friends attended and had her favorite birthday cake. It was a lovely party. She said goodbye to everyone she wanted. Her only wish was that the patients did not see her; she wanted them to remember her as vibrant and energetic. There was not a dry eye in that room, but certainly not in front of her. She would not let you cry. She would be her bossy, loving self and say, “Remember, we have no time for that.” That last day at work, she grabbed my hand and said, “Remember, you will be my hospice nurse.”

A week later, on a beautiful, crisp Sunday morning, I received a call from her daughter, saying, “I need you to come immediately. My mother has taken a turn.” When I arrived, the house was filled with family and friends and smelled of home-cooked chicken soup. Her room overlooked the river, and the sun was shining. My friend knew this was her last day, and she wanted everyone at her bedside, just like she had

planned. I called her name; she opened her eyes and said, “I knew you would remember.” I was called to duty; I was her hospice nurse. I spent the next eight hours watching her hold her loved ones’ hands and assisted with making her as comfortable as possible and then finally take her last breaths. She laid with her family, and it was the most peaceful passing I have ever experienced in 30 years.

I never really thought I would be called to task, but this was her wish for many years, and no one ever said no to Renee.

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The author takes full responsibility for this content and did not receive honoraria or disclose any relevant financial relationships.

#### KEYWORDS

hospice nurse; oncology nursing; breast cancer; end-of-life care

#### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/18.CJON.595-596