

Making a Lasting Impression

Nurse Recalls a Most Amazing, Gentle Woman

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Patients affect our lives in many ways. In my case it was Katherine, a gentle, caring, and amazing lady who touched the hearts of all those who cared for her. It's hard to remember the first day I met Katherine; it seemed as though she had always been a part of my life. Her son always attended clinic and chemotherapy sessions with her. Unfortunately, her malignancy required frequent chemotherapy treatments and often daily visits for an extended period of time. All of the chemotherapy nurses became very close to Katherine and her son. They soon became our friends and felt like family.

Katherine had a way of picking up on concerns that were important or troublesome to each of us in our lives without us even realizing she had done so. We treated her for several months but, as her disease became less responsive and she became weaker, the visits were more difficult for her to manage. During the last week of her life, she asked each of us (the nurses in the chemotherapy hut) one at a time to sit and talk with her. She offered us advice, concern, and hope for the goals and problems that we were experiencing in our lives. She was like a grandmother that anyone would be lucky to have. I was so touched and, at the same time, found myself wondering when she began to take care of us?

Katherine's condition continued to deteriorate. Her last visit with us is one that will always remain in my heart. Her son was very teary and emotional as they arrived to the unit that morning. He knew that his mother's life was nearing an end. He was concerned about her ability to care for herself at home, but she

did not want to be admitted to the hospital. Katherine wanted to be in outpatient chemotherapy where she had been for so long. She felt safe, comfortable, and loved by her physician, all the staff, and the chemotherapy nurses. Katherine did appear weaker that morning, but was alert and responsive.

I do believe that she knew and chose for this to be her last stop. I did not realize this immediately but, retrospectively, I feel that Katherine did. Her condition changed very rapidly that morning. Within minutes of her arrival she became less responsive, developed difficulty breathing, and experienced vital sign changes. The change in her condition was very dramatic and somewhat unexpected. The next few minutes can only be described as a very holy or spiritual experience. Katherine had a peace and readiness on her face, which is difficult to describe, but was obvious to all in the room. Suddenly, the tension and struggling were gone. She still was talking just moments before her death, but she no longer seemed to be speaking with us. She was happy and at peace. Although it was difficult for her family, as well as all of us, to say goodbye, her peace gave us peace. A simple, graceful, peaceful end for a person who lived her life the same way.

It has been several years now since Katherine's death. Her son continues to visit us two to three times a year. He sends us a dozen red roses every Mother's Day in remembrance of his mom. There never is a card, but we always know they



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are from him. At Christmas, he brings sausage balls made from her recipe, which we always enjoyed and still do! We all miss Katherine and remember her often and how she touched our lives. We laugh about the fun times and reminisce and share her story with our newer nurses that did not have the opportunity to know her and the impact she had on us. It truly was a privilege and honor to have a part in her care.

Oncology nursing is about this very story. Throughout the years, there have been so many special people that I have had the privilege to know. It's such an incredible feeling when our patients come back to see us and say "It's been 5 or 10 years now," and many times even longer. It's always exciting to see them again and listen as they share what is new in their lives. Certainly, it is not