

Supporting One Another for 40 Years

Mary L.S. Vachon, PhD, RN, and Deborah K. Mayer, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN

The Oncology Nursing Society's (ONS's) 40th anniversary stimulated our reflections on the professional and personal benefits of caring for people with cancer. We wanted to share a story about an oncology nurse support group that has continued to meet every six weeks for 40 years. Initially, we were all 30–49 years old and are now 70–89!

In the early 1970s, Phyllis Burgess, director of nursing at Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) in Toronto, along with the staff at PMH, became concerned about the psychosocial needs of both the patients and the staff who were having increasing difficulty working with dying patients. Burgess brought a petition from the nurses to the director of PMH for psychological help and training in dealing with patients suffering from life-threatening illnesses. This petition led to the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry working with the staff to address these needs.

As a result, patient support groups began, and nurses from PMH and other centers were taught to facilitate these groups in the Coping With Cancer course. This was offered as a pilot program and sponsored by the Toronto Unit of the Canadian Cancer Society. Group meetings for inpatients and community groups for outpatients and their families aimed to help them cope with the challenges of cancer.

Our group of nine evolved from the course. In 1975, we became group facilitators in various Toronto hospitals and in the community. The support group included Mary Vachon, research scientist and mental health consultant at Clarke Institute of Psychiatry; Joan Wright Haines, nursing director of Oncology Outpatient Clinic, Toronto Western; Ellie Wasserman, head nurse, Oncology, Mount Sinai;

The 1970s . . .



Note. Pictured, from left to right, are Mary Vachon, Ellie Wasserman, Eileen Goodin, Ann Harrington, Bette Johnson, Marg Sigmundson, Marie Samuels, and Pat Walker. Not pictured is Joan Wright Haines.

In my working years, all the people in the group gave amazing support, just being with nursing colleagues and being able to speak freely and know that anything said remained within the four walls of our host's home. Now that I am retired, I love getting together for the great food, the chat, and the camaraderie.

Confidence in starting groups with parents, encouragement to take on Coping With Cancer course, solid group for sharing and problem solving, supportive group of friends for 40 years. Diverse but compatible group even though we don't see each other between meetings, we are there for each, lean on each other, always.



Note. Pictured, from left to right, are Ellie Wasserman, Pat Walker, Marie Samuels, Marg Sigmundson, Ann Harrington, Mary Vachon, Bette Johnson, Joan Haines, and Eileen Goodin.

. . . and today!

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