



Survivors to share how they fought cancer

Conference offers entertainment, chance to network

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Lisa Roberts went to the emergency room with abdominal pain one Sunday afternoon and left with a diagnosis of a rare, aggressive lymphoma.

Chemotherapy had the cancer in retreat at first, but it quickly returned. Roberts underwent a variety of other treatments, including a risky stem cell transplant, to keep the cancer at bay.

There's no denying it's been a punishing two years since the cancer was discovered -- a low point being stuck for seven months in Houston while getting treatment at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, far from her husband and three children in Greer.

But soon after she had surgery to remove a grapefruit-sized tumor, a nationally acclaimed conference for people with cancer made a stop in Greenville, offering Roberts information, inspiration and hope.



Play time: Lisa Roberts plays a board game with her children Zachary, 12, Maggie, 9, and Julianna, 7, in their Eastside home. GEORGE GARDNER / Staff

"I have a whole different perspective now than I did then," says Roberts, 39. "Even at times when it seems really bad, I say we're going to get through this. You have to adjust your mindset and have a positive attitude. That has helped me to keep on going."

Next weekend, the two-day conference - - Cancer as a Turning Point, From Surviving to Thriving -- makes a return visit to Greenville with a new slate of speakers and performers.

"When people have life-threatening illnesses, there are times -- in the waiting room or late at night -- where they have to tap into their inner resources to go on," says Greenville oncologist Jeff Giguere. "This conference, I think, allows them to do that, to find another gear to go to."

The conference, sponsored by Cancer Centers of the Carolinas and Bon Secours St. Francis Health System, features speakers and entertainers with a positive message about living with cancer, including some who are cancer survivors themselves.

Among them are psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen, author of "Close to the Bone: Life-Threatening Illness as a Soul Journey," nutritionist Liz Lipski, who focuses on holistic and complimentary therapies, Dr. Martin L. Rossman, author of "Fighting Cancer from Within: How to Use the Power of Your Mind for Healing," and minister Wayne Muller, author of "Learning to Pray: How We Find Heaven on Earth."

The event also features performances by professional dancer Suzanne Grace, soul singer Sista Monica Parker, who was diagnosed with cancer in 2003, Emmy award-winning composer Gary Malkin, and One World Taiko, a Japanese drum ensemble.

There's even a humorous look at cancer by three-time cancer survivor Jonna Tamases, creator of the one-woman show "Jonna's Body, Please Hold."

The conference also offers survivors a chance to network with others, a critical opportunity, especially for the newly diagnosed -- since the conference was last in the Upstate, more than 40,000 South Carolinians have been diagnosed with cancer.

"People get a sense of community with other people going through similar issues, and a sense of meaning," says Hope Murtaugh, a breast cancer survivor and chair of the steering committee to bring the conference to Greenville, noting that about 500 people have registered for the event so far.

"So often when you have a debilitating experience, whether it's the cancer or the treatment," she says, "it's nice to feel you can look beyond the actual physical reality and find some purpose to it."

For Murtaugh, who was diagnosed four years ago, having cancer became a spiritual experience that imbued her with peace and joy and relieved her fear of death.

"Cancer, and other life-threatening illnesses, can be positive turning points in life," she says. "That doesn't mean it's been a happy experience to go through."

When Roberts first got sick, she figured she'd do six rounds of chemo and be done with cancer. Two years later, she has gone through almost everything oncology has to offer, including surgery, more chemo, and an unsuccessful stem cell transplant from her own bone marrow. Then she got a transplant from her brother and a couple of booster stem cell infusions, along with radiation.

"I have done it all," she says. "Right now, I feel really good. And I hope that this booster will destroy the remaining cancer cells."

At her side through it all has been her mother, Margaret Franchina, whom she credits with helping her get this far.

And keeping a sense of humor has made all the difference in her attitude. She and children Zachary, 12, Maggie, 9, and Julianna, 7, still chuckle over her David Letterman-style Top 10 list of positive things about being hairless, like No. 8 - Save money on the water bill since showers only take two minutes; and the No. 1 good thing about being hairless --You never have a bad hair day.

She's also learned what's important, she says. Like family.

"It used to be that everything had to be just so, running around in the rat race," Roberts says. "But those little things don't bother me any more. For me, it's more about time with my kids, and it just doesn't matter that there's a load of laundry in the dryer."

That's one of the main focuses of the conference, says Giguere, helping people decide how to spend the rest of their lives, no matter how long that is, after being told they have a serious illness.

"When you've given somebody bad news, you know you've left them with a lot of uncertainty, fear and anxiety -- even if they're cured, the celebration lasts until the next appointment," he says. "People who go (to the conference) are looking at ways to live better, to deal with the uncertainty that these diagnoses imply, and to psychologically have a better confidence about themselves and their future, no matter what it holds."

Cancer was a turning point for Roberts. She's learned to live her life a day at a time, to focus on her family, and to never give up the fight.

"You can wither away or you can push on and not give up. I realized that this is what I've been dealt and it's not going to be easy. And I'm not in remission yet," she says. "But every day that you're here is a marker of success."
