

The "Reflections" column features human interest stories about life-changing experiences with patients or other nursing school experiences. Send your column ideas to nsna@nsna.org att: Managing editor.

Moving On: Juggling Leadership, Nursing School, and Cancer

By Karen Bearer

When I decided to take up the adventure of nursing school at the age of 27, I never imagined that I would soon be dealing with another obstacle as well. After receiving a BS in sports medicine, a Masters in education and working as a factory supervisor in the meat packing industry, I realized that I'd been honing my leadership skills all along. However, I still wanted to do more. My mom is a nurse and has always encouraged me in the same career path, but I had to discover this path on my own.

I have always seen myself as a caregiver but after finding two lumps in my right breast, I suddenly found myself in unfamiliar territory as a patient. I had surgery to remove the lumps and found out on a Saturday morning that it was indeed cancer. I was unable to receive the news in person because I was busy in a clinical for school.

I started chemotherapy within three days of my diagnosis and never looked back. Some people, including my professors, thought perhaps I should put school on hold and focus on my health. However, I never considered that option. I saw school as a place where I could be myself and others saw me as a nursing student and not as a cancer patient. After Christmas break, I returned to school wearing my wig to clinicals since I had lost all my hair. Incredibly, I experienced only mild side effects throughout



A healthy Karen Bearer walks the red carpet and "California Dreams" at NSNA's First Night Party in Anaheim, CA.

my treatments. I credit this to my talented team of doctors who were not only supportive and flexible, but sensitive to my age and circumstance.

With everything happening so fast, only a few of my professors were initially aware of my situation. However, since our school was so small, word soon got out about my diagnosis. When I went to speak with Juanita Reese Kline, my med-surg professor, regarding my situation, she said

she already knew and she wished I had told her myself. At first I was upset when she lectured me about having open communication with her, but she ended up being one of my biggest supporters.

Our SNA advisor, Faye Grund, introduced me to a website that helped me keep in touch with family and friends. I created a webpage through Caring Bridge that allowed me to inform well-wishers about my progress. In addition, people could leave encouraging notes and messages.

In the middle of January, my doctor ordered an MRI and was not pleased with the results. A mastectomy was scheduled that week. To avoid missing school, I had the surgery on Friday and was back on the floor by the following week. I wanted to get back as soon as possible. My theory was that hanging IV bags would be a terrific range of motion exercise for me. It worked! My shoulder had full

range of motion within two weeks. I received four more chemotherapy treatments after my surgery followed by six weeks of daily radiation in the summer of 2006. In June 2006, test results indicated that I was cancer free!

Being a 29-year-old cancer survivor has made me reflect more about life, not take things for granted, and not sweat the small stuff. I know this experience will enhance my abilities as a nurse since I can now empathize with my patients.

This year I was the vice-president and fundraiser chair of our school's SNA. We had a successful year, culminating in a poster presentation at NSNA's National Convention. In June 2007, with the support of faculty and administration, I graduated from MedCentral College of Nursing. I have a passion for critical care and I hope to work my way up to management. I will begin an internship in cardiology nursing this summer at a prominent teaching hospital. I am excited to start working as a nurse and begin a new chapter in my life.

One in every eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. Awareness and research is critical. More and more young women are getting this disease and it is important to realize that it is not your grandmother's disease anymore. With support, understanding, and motivation, we can all do our part to find a cure. ©