



Cancer patients put body, soul into healing

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Struck by cancer two years ago, survivor Michael Titus and his wife Patricia, of Durham, N.C., say the disease has drawn them closer than they've ever been.

"It was a turning point," Patricia Titus said. "It has not only improved our relationship, but impacted our lives."

Michael Titus said the couple's trip from North Carolina to attend the "Cancer as a Turning Point" conference at Furman University this weekend is a significant outing for him.

"This is farthest I've been in two years," he said. "I haven't gone into remission."

Titus repeated a theme touched on by each speaker Saturday: The medical community can do only so much to help patients recover from cancer. Each person has to "recognize the will to live," Dr. Rachel Remen, one of several speakers at the conference, which continues today.

"I've had to heal the whole person," Titus said. "I'm not the same person I was. I wouldn't want to be that person again."

Titus said he had to revamp everything — his thinking, his relationship with his wife, his diet, and his views on life and death — to survive cancer.

"You can't help but turn to God when you're overwhelmed," said Patricia Titus, a nurse.

The Tituses joined almost 800 people from almost 20 states and Canada for the conference, said Jan Adrian, an organizer.

Richard Riley, a former South Carolina governor and cancer survivor, welcomed guests.

Adrian said this is the 19th year of the conference and the first on the East Coast. The major sponsors were Bon Secours St. Francis Health System and Cancer Centers of the Carolinas.

Giving the introductory address, Adrian asked those in the audience who had been diagnosed with cancer to stand up; more than half of those in McAlister Auditorium stood.

Some have been diagnosed with months to live and spoke of how they've used a variety of therapies, from alternative medicines to changes in diet, exercise and yoga, to survive.

Russ Burns said he survived a prognosis in 1998 that gave him just months to live.

"The danger in accepting all of this can be a self-fulfilling prognosis," he said. "My response to my doctor's prognosis

is that it was unacceptable."

So, Burns said he began to fight and struggle back, with chemo, with music, with anything he could think of.

"I came to realize that cancer treatment is more than what's FDA approved," he said. "You're never so alive as when you face your death."

Remen, a motivational speaker giving a keynote address, said even her medical training must be augmented with mental and spiritual remedies to help cancer survivors.

"The doctors can't tell you what they don't know," she said in a hour-long speech.

Remen, who has had eight surgeries in 50 years, recounted a story from when she was a teen living in New York City about mystery's role in illness. She said she and a friend were walking down a Manhattan street when they looked down and spotted "two blades of grass" growing through the pavement. She said the incident has always been an "ah-ha" moment for her.

"There is a will to live in all of us," Remen said. "All it needs is a faithfulness. Following your deepest wisdom may be the best way to live."

Remen, a best-selling author, said surviving cancer frequently takes skills most people don't realize they have, and developing a viewpoint they never dreamed they could have.

"There's very little to help us recognize the mysteries in life," she said. "Sometimes the more somebody knows, they less likely they would be open to mystery."

Mary Bernau-Eigen of Milwaukee, Wis., a nurse practitioner of 23 years diagnosed with cancer, said Remen's advice resonated with her.

"In our society, you hear death when cancer pops up," Bernau-Eigen said. "Cancer doesn't necessarily mean death."

Eva Dew Danner of Charlotte, twice diagnosed with cancer, said she was familiar with Remen and had heard her tapes but wasn't aware of her whole story.

"I think the most inspiring thing is that she has lived with a disease her whole life," she said. She said whoever hopes to win a battle with cancer must learn how combine medical assistance with "something bigger than what we can touch and see."

"I'm still trying to sort that out," Dew Danner said.

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