



Cancer can be positive turning point in life

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She is 'Miss Jackie' today, sharing the excitement each time a preschooler manages to pour a cup of milk without spilling it.

But nearly six years ago doctors found cancer in her right lung during a routine X-ray after a car accident. And Jackie Weddington was so angry and afraid she took to her bed and hid beneath the covers. Then, she says, something changed.



Cancer survivor Jackie Weddington works with students from left, Jonathan Shelor, 3, J.R. Roberts, 4, and Joshua Moore, 3, as a Montessori teacher at the UU World of Children(OWEN RILEY JR/Staff)

"I said, OK. I've got a year anyway. I can sit around and feel sorry for myself or I can get off my butt and do something," says the 63-year-old Greenville woman who now is an intern in the Montessori teaching method. "I want to live as fully as I can now."

Cancer strikes one in three people. And thanks to medical advances, it's often more of a chronic disease than a fatal one. But it's still frightening. So it may seem hard to understand when Sandra Bullock, mission delivery manager for the American Cancer Society in Anderson, Greenville and Laurens counties, says it can be a positive turning point in a person's life.

"You can curl up in fetal position or move on with your life, and more and more people are doing that," she says. "They do things they always wanted to do but never took the time to do, like starting a new career, getting a hobby or traveling."

That's the message of an upcoming event at Furman University — "Cancer as a Turning Point—From Surviving to Thriving." The two-day event gathers medical experts, nutritionists, entertainers and survivors to share stories of celebrating life after a diagnosis of cancer, like comedian and survivor Scott Burton.

"I felt, and still do," he says, "that each moment laughing is a moment you are if only for a second in love with life."

Other presenters include psychologist and author Lawrence LeShan, who teaches cancer patients how they can enrich their lives, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, who helps physicians develop more empathy and compassion for their patients, and nutritionist Jeanne Wallace, who espouses dietary changes as an adjunct to cancer treatment.

Among the survivors are David M. Bailey, who eschewed corporate life nine years ago to become a singer-songwriter after he was given six months to live when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and inspirational humorist Terri Tate, a nurse who fought back from tongue cancer to become a motivational speaker.

The conference provides a blueprint for what life can be after a diagnosis of cancer, says Robin Davenport, who is credited with starting the movement to bring the event, which has only been held on the West Coast up to now, to the Upstate.

"When you have a life-altering illness, oftentimes you feel as if you've totally lost control," says Davenport, who has a rare form of cancer that spread to her lungs. "This conference helps people realize there are many things they can do on their own that will enhance their quality of life."

Davenport, 62, was watching a public television special when she was introduced to LeShan's approach. Following his suggestion, she made two lists — one of things that made her feel alive and another of things that sapped her. It helped her eliminate the negative and incorporate more life-affirming activities, like painting and reading.

"It redefined my life," she says, "and shows the powerful thing about the mind-body connection."

Afterward, she attended a 2003 Healing Journey conference in Seattle and was so moved she decided to rally friends to help raise the \$120,000 needed to ensure the event could be offered for free. So far, she says, registrations have come in from 19 states and Canada.

"There's a quote from Maya Angelou: 'People won't remember what you did or what you said, but nobody will ever forget how you made them feel,' " she says. "It's how this conference makes you feel. You are still valued. This illness can enhance your life. It doesn't have to diminish you. It gave me a great feeling of hope."

Lessons from the conference can also help health care providers view their patients as more than just bodies and illnesses, says Dr. Jeffrey Giguere, an oncologist with CancerCenters of the Carolinas, a sponsor of the event.

"Some of these concepts are a little more integrative, complementary, and humanistic," he says. "You want to take care of the person, not just the cancer cells that have gone bad."

Tuning into that mind-body connection has helped Greenville lawyer Martha Miller survive and thrive despite the diagnosis of cancer she got 10 years ago.

"It can go either way with cancer, and I'm no more special than anyone else," says Miller, a member of the conference steering committee.

"But if your immune system is weakened by the stress of fearing death and all the other adverse things that happen to you when you have cancer, it can pull you down," she says. "And if you can learn to let go of the fear and the dread, you can be happy and productive in ways that you could not be, and I feel that is helpful to your immune system to fight the cancer."

Weddington was terrified when she learned that more people die from lung cancer than any other cancer, and that few survive five years. Both her parents had died of lung cancer.

But she was afraid of the pain, too. She wondered whether she'd be courageous throughout it all and handle herself with dignity. She feared that her grown children would have to care for her. Dealing with all that, as well as the meningitis that her 4-year-old granddaughter was not expected to survive around the same time, caused her to re-examine her life.

"The way I like to look at it knowing that life is finite, is that for the privilege of being alive, and all this beauty and wonder, and love and kindness and friendship, you have to accept the fact that it will end some day," she says. "And it makes you more aware. You have to be alive now."

She learned to prioritize, too.

"I'd lay in bed at night and worry did I do this or did I do that? Or I should have said this or that. What a waste of precious time," she says. "I could be going for a walk, reading a book, having a conversation."

Miller, 51, was a self-described control freak who fretted over every little thing as she tried to be super mom to her kids, then 10 and 13. Cancer was "a real wake-up call," she says, helping her to slow down, enjoy time with her family, and with herself.

"It really taught me what's most important in life, and to appreciate every moment I have, that it is a transient thing and not worry about tomorrow, because you realize it's not in our power," she says. "I'm just very happy to be here."

The conference lessons are offered through music, drama, inspirational talks and humor as an empowering celebration of what the human experience can be, says Gene Covington, another member of the steering committee.

After her husband, Greenville businessman Champ Covington, was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1999, they both discovered strength they didn't realize they had. They were enriched by, and grateful for, the people they met along the way. And they relish every day.

"Champ often says if he had to do it over again, to go through it or not, he would go through it because our lives and our relationship were so enhanced," Gene Covington says. "And we have both really been grateful for the opportunity to share with other people who are going through the same thing."

Weddington now enjoys life so much she wishes she'd started her Montessori training earlier.

"Working with children, there's always so much joy and wonder, because everything is so new for them," she says. "Sometimes when I see life through them, it's like I'm seeing it for the first time."

Giguere says an attitude like Weddington's is the point of the conference. There are people who focus on the thorns and those who focus on the roses. And while science may not be able to prove that those who focus on the roses live longer, they certainly live better, he says.

"There are the Tiggers and the Eeyores," he says of the optimistic and pessimistic Winnie the Pooh characters. "And this conference is about taking some of those Eeyores and making them into Tiggers."