

## Cast Away With Cancer

Katherine Wilson entered nursing school in 1999 and, soon after, developed a cough and chest pain which turned out to be small cell lung cancer. Katherine's strength and courage helped her to conquer her disease and go on to graduate from the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Nursing in 2004 with a BSN and as a Sigma Theta Tau inductee. However, after six recurrences, Katherine died on February 16, 2005, at the age of 28. Katherine's own words from the nursing school assignment that follows are an inspiration and touch the heart of oncology nursing.

I recently saw the movie *Cast Away*. I'm sure my perception of the movie was quite different from the perception of others in the theater. To me, a 24-year-old lung cancer survivor, *Cast Away* was, in many ways, metaphorically about cancer. The movie began by revealing the day-to-day life of FedEx employee Chuck Noland, the character played by Tom Hanks. One evening, Chuck's normal routine was disastrously wrecked. He said goodbye to his girlfriend and boarded his plane to make a trans-Pacific FedEx delivery. However, the plane encountered a turbulent storm, lost control, and crashed. The audience felt Chuck's horrific terror as the plane plunged thousands of feet and crashed into the ocean. The small plane was engulfed and destroyed by the powerful sea. Chuck awoke on his emergency raft as he floated ashore on a remote island.

To me, this crash represented my cancer diagnosis. I was in nursing school at the time of my diagnosis, incredibly busy with my own routine. On April 7, I abruptly left my seat in the middle of class to go to the student health center because the sharp chest and back pain I had been experiencing for a week had developed an odd crackling noise in my lungs that morning. I had a chest x-ray and it was decidedly "unusual." Pulmonary specialists were called over from UNC, and they

felt that I should be treated for walking pneumonia. After taking antibiotics for five days, I returned to the pulmonary clinic to be evaluated. The chest x-ray and computed tomography scan revealed an abnormality in my lung. The doctors recommended a lung biopsy.

There was no question; I immediately had the biopsy. On April 25, my surgeon regretfully told me that I had small cell lung cancer. All the tests prior to my diagnosis were like a storm. My life was disrupted and suddenly boisterous. The diagnosis was a terrifying, tragic "crash." A wave of overwhelming emotion and indescribable fear engulfed my soul. I thought I was going to die. And I thought about the countless number of individuals who had died before me of this same despised disease. I am sure that Chuck thought he was going to die and he probably thought of the many people who died in plane crashes before him. But both Chuck and I survived our crashes.

### New World

Through my eyes, the turmoil of Chuck's new world was similar, emotionally and mentally, to the tumultuous world of a patient with cancer. To survive, Chuck and I had to display unstoppable determination and insurmountable strength and had to rely on love and hope to nourish and motivate our spirits.

Chuck's determination was best exhibited in his hard work in starting a fire. He spent hours and hours rubbing sticks together, completely focused only on the fire. When it finally ignited, he yelled, "Look what I have created!" As a patient with cancer, I feel that surviving the treatment required extreme determination to fight every little battle that came along the way. There were battles all day, every day, for six months. Combatting constant constipation that resulted

from the medications I was taking was quite difficult. I persistently tried many different methods that were painfully nauseating before finding something that actually worked. When it worked, I, like Chuck, wanted to scream, "Look what I have created!"

Eating while undergoing cancer treatment also required strong-mindedness. Because of chest radiation with concurrent chemotherapy, I acquired one of the worst cases of esophagitis ever seen at UNC hospitals. I couldn't even take a sip of water without experiencing indescribably unbearable pain. I was hospitalized for about three weeks and could not eat anything. My determination not to waste away inspired me to numb my throat with "magic mouthwash" between each sip of Boost<sup>®</sup> which my mother encouraged (maybe even forced) me to drink. These sips of Boost sustained me during that period of time, although I lost 25 pounds and didn't have nearly that much to spare to begin with.

Later in my treatment, I experienced nights where I left the chemotherapy clinic vomiting and continued to vomit every couple of hours until I returned to the clinic the next day, only to receive more of the "poison." My whole body was involved in the vomiting; it felt like I was retching from my toes up. It took determination just to survive nights like those.

### Strength to Endure

Essential to Chuck's survival was his deep inner strength to endure. He reached a point where his own strength was not enough to sustain him. He then created Wilson from a volleyball that washed ashore in a package. Wilson was symbolic