

QUESTION

What do you do when oncology chooses you?

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My journey through nursing school at the University of Hawaii Maui College has been the most challenging but, by far, the most memorable adventure of my life. During this short-lived period, I lost my mom, who was also my best friend, to stage IV non-small cell lung cancer. Almost three years have passed, but the memories and the emotions are still quite vivid.

It was the evening after my LPN pinning ceremony when I walked in on my mom hunched over the kitchen table, breathing rapidly. I asked her what was wrong, but she hesitated to tell me. Her oxygen saturation, regardless of deep breathing, was at 89% with a heart rate in the 130s. I looked at her and said, “Mom, we need to go to the ED, now!” The staff took her immediately and performed diagnostic tests.

In the midst of this nightmare, all I could do was pray and hold back my tears. The physician told me they needed to perform surgery on her ASAP to drain the fluid in her heart and lungs. He kept talking but, in the chaos, all I heard was the word “surgery.”

The morning after, the attending hospitalist told me that the surgery went well but that my mother’s cancer had recurred. The cancer fluid build-up was the cause of the cardiac tamponade and pleural effusion. I asked myself if I should take a break from nursing school. My mom could tell what I was thinking because she looked at me and said, “We’ll get through this. I need you to be strong for me and finish what you started.”

As my mom’s primary caregiver, I did my best to juggle nursing school with my personal life. I didn’t want anyone from my nursing cohort or my instructors to know what I was going through because I didn’t want to be treated differently. My life consisted of going to school, clinical rotations, frequent hospitalizations, taking care of my mom at home, and taking her to all of her appointments, which included visits that occurred every two to three weeks at the outpatient clinic.

The hospital became my second home during my mom’s last few months. I studied for my exams, wrote my papers, and

completed all of my assignments at my mom’s bedside. I managed to keep a smile on my face, but, toward the last few weeks of her life, I couldn’t anymore. I turned to my nursing family, closest friends, and instructors for support—and they were there for me.

My friends outside of nursing school took my mom to her appointments when I could not. My classmates offered to take notes for me and record the lectures in class, so I would have more time to be with my mom. Most importantly, my instructors and friends were physically there to give me comfort and listen to me during such a difficult time in my life.

A week prior to my mom’s passing, she said to me, “Lynn, I’m really sorry, but I’m tired. Whatever happens, I want you to finish for me. Be strong and know that I’ll always be with you, no matter what.” I had six months left until RN graduation. There was no choice but to direct all of my time and energy to graduating for my mom.

The graduation ceremony was hard for me because I didn’t have my mom there. It was difficult to watch my classmates sharing the moment with their mothers when I could not. I remember asking for a sign from my mom to tell me that she was there with me and, just like that, it started raining. It rained on our ceremony, and we were all soaking wet. I knew in my heart that she was watching over me.

A few months after graduation, I received a call from the outpatient clinic where my mother had been treated and was surprised to hear from the nurse manager. She asked how I was doing and said, “I know you must be sensitive around the topic of cancer, but we have an opening, and I would love for you to work here.” I was hesitant, but I thought of how it would be an amazing opportunity to not only grow as a nurse, but also help me to overcome my grief. After everything I had been through, I did not think that my path would have led me here, but I am thankful that it did. My experiences with my mom left me stronger and have allowed me to be a better advocate for my patients and their family members. I truly feel like oncology chose me.

RESOURCES

- **American Cancer Society**
Offers resources for caregivers and family members
<https://bit.ly/2kihHKf>

- **Caregiver Action Network**
Provides education, support, and resources to family caregivers
<https://caregiveraction.org>

- **National Cancer Institute**
Support for Caregivers: When Someone You Love Has Advanced Cancer
<https://bit.ly/2zgXooW>

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