

Maryl Lynne Wunningham

On February 18, 2001, Maryl Lynne Wunningham, PhD, RN, FACSM, died from metastatic breast cancer, which was diagnosed only 10 months previously. She was 53 years old. Maryl is survived by her housemate of 18 years, Barbara A. Preusser, PhD, FNP, RN, her father, Jerry, and three brothers, David, Joel, and Paul.

Maryl was a “diamond in the rough” who shone brightly, revealing different facets of herself to those around her. Some were never blessed with seeing the myriad of her personality facets, as she felt more comfortable sharing them with her closest friends and family members. Maryl worked tirelessly on behalf of others. During the early 1970s, Maryl worked at great personal risk among the many persecuted Christians living in Eastern European countries, counseling them, and helping them adjust to the ravages of the political, physical, and emotional forms of abuse they had experienced. Maryl had a very special gift for helping people that stemmed from her own personal knowledge, suffering, and experience. Her desire to alleviate suffering in others led her to complete her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing at Ohio State University in 1990 and 1991, respectively.

Maryl was artistically and technologically creative. She once shared with me a book of her poetry. The poems in this book emanated from her personal experiences, including her work in Eastern Europe. Some of her poems questioned how such suffering could occur, particularly in children and those least able to defend themselves. Other poems revealed the inner strengths and intense spiritual growth and religious insights that only come from such suffering. I felt very privileged to read her poetry with her, as each poem revealed an incredible insight and depth of emotion rarely captured in the written word. It was a personal revelation for me to see this side of Maryl and be able to appreciate this facet of her emotional expression and creativity.

Maryl had a talent for sculpting clay figures that reflected the people in her poems. She would take photographs of her clay sculptures and scan these images into her computer, where she was able to crop and color them to accompany specific poems in her collection. She would print these drawings from her computer and give them to her friends as



framed gifts or “paintings.” She experimented with creating and drawing modernistic, abstract art on her computer, revealing her ability to use this form of technology to both reflect and evoke different emotional reactions and responses in those who viewed them.

What I found personally most surprising and revealing about Maryl’s artistic talents was how incredibly centered, calm, and focused she would be whenever she discussed her poems and drawings with me. Her true self, the one that possessed great inner spiritual strength, self-confidence, and love, was being revealed to me through the sharing of these wonderful works. Too few people ever got to see or appreciate this facet of Maryl during her lifetime. This special gift will be shared more widely when Maryl’s book of poetry and drawings is published posthumously.

Professionally, Maryl was known internationally for her work in cancer-related fatigue and cancer rehabilitation. In 1983, as a young doctoral student in Physical Education at Ohio State University in Columbus, she developed and conducted the very first research protocol designed to test the safety and efficacy of an aerobic exercise program in women newly diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer. Mary MacVicar, PhD, RN, from the College of Nursing at Ohio State University, served as the chairperson for her dissertation committee. Maryl’s dissertation

(Wunningham, 1983) was extremely novel at the time because cancer rehabilitation and the thought of using aerobic exercise in patients with cancer were still in the “Dark Ages.” In 1983, patients with cancer were considered “too sick” to be able to exercise safely. Subsequent studies by Maryl and MacVicar showed that a supervised, tailored aerobic exercise program in women with early-stage breast cancer resulted in improved patient outcomes, such as decreased fatigue (MacVicar & Wunningham, 1986), decreased nausea (Wunningham & MacVicar, 1988), increased functional capacity (MacVicar, Wunningham, & Nickel, 1989), and improved body weight and composition (Wunningham, MacVicar, Bondoc, Anderson, & Minton, 1989). A patient-education booklet, which describes a walking program that patients with cancer can follow with supervision, resulted from these studies (Mock et al., 1994; Wunningham, 1991; Wunningham, Glass, & MacVicar, 1990). This publication was innovative as it occurred before others proclaimed the benefits of walking.

Maryl developed the Psycho-Biologic Entropy Model for addressing the study of cancer fatigue. It emphasized for the first time the inter-relationships that exist between cancer fatigue as a primary symptom along with other primary symptoms, such as pain and insomnia, and the secondary symptoms, including fatigue, that can result if the primary symptoms are not treated effectively. The model also described the relationships between energy loss, these symptoms, and the disuse syndrome that can result from the lack of exercise or activity that can lead to an ever-increasing downward spiral of increasing fatigue and symptomatology (Wunningham et al., 1994).

Maryl and Margaret Barton-Burke, PhD(c), RN, were the first scientists to conceive of conducting a symposium on cancer-related fatigue and following through with this idea by receiving funding from the Schering Corporation to bring fatigue nurse scientists together for a “state of the science” meeting in 1992. Meeting outcomes included a comprehensive article on cancer-related fatigue (Wunningham et al., 1994) and subsequent Fatigue Initiatives Through Research and Education (FIRE) projects and medically

conducted research funded by Ortho Biotech, Inc., which occurred throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Without their vision for this initial summit, cancer fatigue still might be in the dark. Maryl and Barton-Burke later collaborated on the first book to be published on cancer-related fatigue (Winningham & Barton-Burke, 2000). Before her death, Maryl earmarked the royalties from this publication to go toward funding ovarian cancer research.

Maryl was always a very giving person, willing to share whatever she had to give, who wore her "heart on her sleeve." MacVicar believed that Maryl was an artist with much potential, creativity, and drive who happened to be caught between social expectations and definitions of achievement and what she felt in her soul. Despite occasional turbulence in her wake, Maryl tried to live what she believed and believe what she lived. Someone might agree or disagree with Maryl, but no one could ever question her values and commitment to oncology. MacVicar also has no doubt that Maryl already has sought out and engaged the ancients in debates over philosophy, art, and music. She is equally convinced that Maryl will wear these ancients down with her creative and persistent arguments.

Comments from others (Barton-Burke, Bernadine M. Pinto, PhD, and Eileen S.

Donovan PT, MEd, just to name a few), upon hearing of her untimely death, revealed Maryl's incredible facet for sharing her knowledge with others, her wonderful sense of humor, and her unerring support and mentoring for others engaged in exercise and fatigue research. Maryl has left an incredible legacy and body of work in cancer fatigue, exercise, and rehabilitation that will endure for a long time to come.

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