Nurses Week Surprise!

May 9, 2018 By Lindsay Norris

I had THE most incredible surprise at work today. I was recently asked to speak at a Nurses Week event about my experience as a nurse turned patient… and turns out they were surprising me with The University of Kansas Health System Magnet Nurse of the Year Award! I was floored, and so humbled to accept this amazing honor. It was such a nice ceremony and I can't wait to see what exciting things are to follow! As our CEO and CNO were chatting with me afterwards, they joked around saying they hope I didn't spend too much time writing out the talk I was never to give. I assured them, no worries… I can use it as a blog post, ha! So, behold — my thoughts about Nurses Week and the privilege to work where I do. (Pardon some of the repeat back story that I've shared here before.)

About a year and a half ago, I was just like any other working mom…adjusting to life with a new baby and busy toddler while running on fumes. On September 27th 2016, my personal life and work life had a major collision.

I needed a visit with a colorectal surgeon to follow up on some persistent postpartum GI symptoms, something I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about . Of course, working in the cancer center, I know the GI surgery group well — so I asked my friend who's a nurse for the team to squeeze me in their schedule for a quick appointment.

Well, the quick appointment turned into an urgent procedure that found a large suspicious mass. The surgeon was upfront with me from the start… "there is nothing else that grows in that area and acts like this." After additional scopes, biopsies, and scans, that week — I was diagnosed with Stage 3c Colorectal Cancer at the age of 33.

I quickly realized that baby feeding schedules and toddler tantrums were no longer going to be my biggest worries.

My nursing work family flew into action. My friend who scheduled me in the surgeon's clinic was already on the phone getting all the other needed diagnostic appointments scheduled for the next few days before I even walked out of the exam room. My other friends on the GI Oncology nursing team got the message and quickly alerted the Oncologist who was out of the country so they could start to develop a treatment plan ASAP. I could talk about my amazing doctors all day… but it's nurses week — and they truly are the glue that holds the health system together.

The imaging nurses welcomed me warmly giving me music to listen to to calm my fears. During my first scans, I had no idea how far my cancer had traveled in my body — I showed up that

morning desperate for answers but afraid of what they would mean. I never knew how lonely and terrifying that tube is, and those nurses and techs made it bearable.

The procedure nurses discretely prepared me for scopes and exams while protecting my dignity and privacy. The procedures you go through getting diagnosed with colorectal cancer are just about as awful and uncomfortable as you can imagine — and I always had a hand to hold.

The radiation oncology nurses explained in detail what I could expect during radiation and the long term side effects. The nurses worked closely with the physicians and radiation therapist to make sure I was tolerating the radiation well and counted the days along with me. I had daily radiation for 6 weeks, they became like family.

My surgical oncology nurse prepared me for the biggest surgery I've ever faced and life with an ostomy. I knew exactly what I was getting into and what to expect throughout surgical recovery. Having a permanent change to your body can be very overwhelming — but she encouraged me by telling me stories of others who are living normal, active lives after the same surgery — and she always knew when to throw in a good poop joke.

The OR nurses worked like well-oiled machines to get me through pre op and ready to go, all while ensuring me that everything would be ok and they would keep my family updated throughout the day. And waking up to a kind smile and nod in the PACU as the nurse whispered a quick "everything went great" was the most relieved I think I've ever felt.

The phlebotomy nurses are so skilled at accessing ports and starting IVs that I never flinched. They were quick and painless and always got me in fast so I could be on my way.

The Emergency Department nurses rushed me back to get immediate help each time I developed acute (excruciating) colitis from chemo. They got my nausea and pain under control quickly and figured out what exactly was going on. My husband and I know if things go downhill fast, we just need to get there — and they take care of the rest.

The inpatient nurses, both after my surgery and during the few surprise admissions I had during chemo, were so kind and hospitable. I was checked on constantly, kept up to date with communication between specialties, and had my every need met quickly. They welcomed my family at any time and were so sweet to my kids as they visited — making a scary environment seem like another home.

The treatment nurses never greeted me without a warm blanket and a smile on chemo days, and would efficiently get me through my infusion and back to work. My nurses knew when I wanted to chat, and they knew when I needed a nap. They gave me the most special gift and celebrated along with me on my last treatment day. I will always have fond memories of my "chair time."

My medical oncology nurses were and still are my lifeline. They immediately responded with the reassurance I needed anytime I felt a mystery pain or twinge I was sure meant the cancer was growing. Sometimes I needed to hear the same things over and over again to talk myself back

down — and they would repeat anything as many times I needed with a smile. They quickly reported any results and took any action needed right away. They answered questions I didn't even know I had and checked on me often. They are my go to team for anything — and I trust them with my life.

I've worked in Oncology at KU my entire adult life, but getting diagnosed with cancer myself made me realize how little I knew about what being a cancer patient really feels like. The fear and uncertainty are crippling, but the swift action and care taken by my Cancer Center family made the battle that lied ahead of me seem doable. You may think I got special treatment since I'm also an employee of the Cancer Center — but I promise you this isn't true. I see these same nurses going above and beyond like they have for me every day for every patient. It's just what they do; it's what we do. I've never been more proud to be a part of something, and am so honored to continue to care for and relate to our patients with a deeper understanding.

Now, my baby is almost 2 and I've been cancer free for 15 months. Yes, I will have to be under close surveillance for years to come, but luckily, my care team and second family is never far away.

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