Carol Halberstadt Puts Her Cancer Experiences Into Poetry

January 23, 2018 By Cancer Health Staff

Carol Halberstadt, a lung cancer survivor and lymphoma patient, began using her writing skills as a complementary therapy in 2004, never expecting to see her poems published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. In this blog post, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute spoke with her about chronicling her "cancer odyssey."

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Since 2014, more than 40 of Halberstadt's poems, including those focused on her ongoing care at Dana-Farber, have appeared in the Poetry and Medicine section of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). Each new piece is accessed by thousands of online readers, as well as print subscribers to the peer-reviewed medical journal. Doctors across the country regularly email Halberstadt to praise and comment on her work, including fellow cancer survivors with whom she enjoys continuing correspondence.

And, after more than a half-century as a professional writer, Halberstadt recently achieved a new career milestone: her first book deal.

It has been a surprising chain of events for the 79-year-old grandmother, and Halberstadt is thrilled that her poetry appears to be helping others as it helps her.

"I always feel that a poem is at its most complete after you send it out into the world," says Halberstadt, a Bronx native and longtime Newton resident who trained as an artist and anthropologist. "When you find out that someone has been touched by it, that's when it's completed. That's what all art, science, and medicine is about—touching others."

This desire for connection is what prompted Halberstadt to send JAMA her first cancer-related poem, "Mind," written in October 2014 just before her lung cancer surgery. It begins: "Will I still think and dream, as I am put to sleep again, / and when I wake will I still write / the unknown chapter of my life— / these words that wait now deep within…" She dedicated it to Steven J. Mentzer, MD, her thoracic surgeon at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center.

Suzanne O'Regan, MSW, LICSW, Halberstadt's Dana-Farber social worker, believes her poems have resonated with readers because they eloquently describe "a range of cancer-related realities" such as change, loss, uncertainty, determination, growth and hope.

“Carol’s poems give her cancer ‘odyssey’ a voice, a name, an experience, and a time holder,” says O’Regan. “She is more than her cancer diagnosis. Carol is a poet, a writer, an editor, a mother, a grandmother, a scientist, a friend, a community member, an advocate, a patient, a cancer fighter, a woman—and all those voices are being heard through her poetry. Because of cancer, we are forever changed—and from these challenges we can be healed by sharing, learning and supporting one another.”

O’Regan and Halberstadt’s oncologists agree that just as her poetry inspires others, it provides a way of coping with her cancers.

“Writing gave Carol a sense that cancer and its treatment had not taken away her creativity,” says David C. Fisher, MD, who has treated Halberstadt’s lymphoma since her fall 2016 diagnosis. “Reading these poems helps other patients recognize that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences.” Pasi Jänne, MD, PhD, her thoracic oncologist, adds that “it also helps channel her normal and natural anxiety associated with a cancer diagnosis. Carol communicates her thoughts and feelings through her poetry.”

Charlene Breedlove, associate editor of Poetry and Medicine at JAMA, has long encouraged Halberstadt to seek a wider audience. This opportunity came recently when another supporter, JAMA reader Vernon Rowe, MD, connected Halberstadt with Whirlybird Press in Shawnee, Kansas, which plans to publish a book of her poetry. “I never sit down to write a poem, they come to me,” says Halberstadt. “Sometimes I’ll joke with Suzanne about when I’m ‘having’ a poem.

“Before I’m done,” Halberstadt adds, “I hope to have a lot more of them.”

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