



# Cancer Connection

## *The Inspirer*

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*"Our mission is to improve the quality of life for individuals and families affected by cancer..."*

### **All It Takes** by Elizabeth Amsler

Throughout the course my life, I've rarely found it difficult to strike up a conversation with anyone. Sometimes it's about absolutely nothing and sometimes it's about everything. I wouldn't say that I've never met a stranger, because I've met some pretty strange people in my time, and some of them are my friends.

In the time since I gave up my car (nearly a year ago), it's been a necessity for me to walk many places. During our recent record breaking summer heat here in Austin, that has been quite the task. However, it became significantly more pleasant, and necessary, since I became a mother - to Buddy the Dog: Dog of the People, a.k.a. BTD.

Sometimes we walk up to the local drugstore, where I tie Buddy's leash around the pole out front. The pole isn't quite far enough from the automatic door and it opens and closes almost the entire time I'm inside. People always walk out thinking someone is on the other side of the door, and there is Buddy, expecting his mama, but just as happy to meet someone new.

Many times, I come outside to find my dog holding court and campaigning for president—shaking paws and licking babies and sharing his platform of love for the people. Nothing serious ever comes out of these interactions. He's yet to help me meet my next ex-husband, a new best friend or anything of the sort.

A few months after I finished chemotherapy, we walked up to the drugstore. At the time, this was still a bit of a challenge for me, so I was pretty tired when we arrived. I left Buddy at his post and went inside. To my surprise, he had no audience when I returned. As I

untied his leash, a man approached the store and Buddy saw fit to introduce himself. Most men just smile and keep walking. I mean a chick with a poodle is hardly rare. But Buddy's agenda was strong enough to hold this guy's attention and we began to talk.

We talked about what a great comfort pets can be. Then he told me that his daughter, who lives out of state, was going through cancer treatment right now and her dog had been a great comfort to her. He also told me that it made him feel better to know that she had a companion there with her when he and his wife couldn't be.

I don't know what kind of cancer the man's daughter was being treated for, but that bit of information was irrelevant. My intent was simply to wish his daughter well so I said, "I won't say anymore than this, but I have been through what your daughter is going through firsthand and I wish her

and your family all the best." He thanked me. Then he said, "I don't want to pry, but can you tell me what point you're at in the process?"

That was when I realized the opportunity that had been set before me. I told the man that I had finished chemo two months prior and that this was my second time to go through it. I told him that my life is not without its challenges, but that I could honestly say that overall, things are going very well.

I also conveyed my philosophy to him: How many people have the chance to change their lives? And furthermore, how many people actually *act* upon that opportunity when it is set before them? And how amazing is it that I have been presented with this opportunity twice and acted upon it both times.



During my first experience with surgery and chemo, I promised myself that if I ever had to do this again that I would do certain things differently. This promise was honored *in its entirety* during my recurrence. While I don't wish this disease on anyone and hope that my treatment days are over, I am thankful for the experience and opportunity. It is through this experience that I was able to recognize the purpose for my presence on this earth.

He thanked me and asked me if it would be ok if he passed that along to his daughter. "YES. PLEASE DO". I then told him, "Please deliver this message to her directly from me: If there is something that you have always wanted to do or know you are meant to do, DO IT. DON'T WAIT. Now is the time. This is your chance."

At this point, I was holding Buddy in my arms and gave him a kiss on the head and we bid the man farewell. It was all I could do to hold my tears until we rounded the corner.

Several days later, Buddy and I went on another walk to the drugstore. As I was paying for my things the clerk pulled something from beneath the register. She said "I think this is for you" and handed me a folded piece of paper that said "To the woman with Buddy The Dog." I opened it while the clerk watched with curiosity. Inside it said:

*Before we talked, I couldn't see past my own pain for my daughter's suffering. There was nothing I could do to help her and so I couldn't even talk to her about it. You gave me hope, which I will pass along to my family and to my daughter.*

Maybe this isn't everybody's gig. Not everyone is comfortable talking about their cancer experience. Not everyone can tell a stranger their story. And we're not always going to get confirmation that what we've done has helped. But all of us have some way to use what we have been through to help one person. And that, my friends, is all it takes.

*Elizabeth Amsler is an ovarian cancer survivor and blogs about her experiences at [elizabethability.ning.com](http://elizabethability.ning.com)*

## Survivorship: The Damocles Syndrome by Penny DeCou LCSW

In a local cancer support group I once helped facilitate, a topic of conversation amongst several survivors was the sense of unease that many felt when treatment was finished. When talking with friends and family this emotion could be hard to put into words. People are understandably happy for you when you finish chemo/surgery/radiation. It is a time to celebrate, ring a bell, throw confetti, to get *out of there* – you are done! Time to get on with your life and move forward... Why then are you just not as excited as everyone else?

While it is expected that patients would be jubilant on finishing treatment, in fact the opposite sometimes occurs. Cancer survivors can have a paradoxical increase in distress just after treatment, related to a feeling of vulnerability. Two main factors cause this new and unexpected anxiety: the fear that the cancer could come back now that they were without the protective effects of treatment, and the fear that they are not being watched as closely by their doctors. Patients can feel ambivalent about leaving the protective cocoon of doctors, nurses and others who supported them through treatment.

Most cancer survivors typically wonder, "Did I have cancer, or do I *still have cancer*?" This common

feeling in survivors is referred to as the *Damocles syndrome*."



According to Greek legend, once Damocles realized that a sword was dangling precariously over his head, he could no longer enjoy the banquet spread in front of him. In the same way, the specter of cancer hangs over some cancer survivors. Usually, this fear slowly recedes as the

time from diagnosis and treatment increases. But the fear can exacerbate just before follow-up visits, scans, and tests for cancer. It also may reappear around significant anniversaries related to the cancer, such as the day of the diagnosis or the surgery.

So what can you do? One psychiatrist suggests the following: Just imagine with me that your frightening thoughts are like voices on a radio. They can be controlled by changing the volume. When the volume is up too high, the noise (your fear) is so loud you can't hear or think of anything else. But you can turn

the volume down, so low that you still hear the noise (your fear) in the background, but it doesn't bother you so much, and you can concentrate on other things.

Survivorship literature suggests it is helpful to approach predictable, anxiety-provoking periods by talking about them with others: family, friends, support group members, or a psychotherapist or counselor, if the anxiety interferes with your normal activities. It may be helpful mentally to "count to ten" and recall, rationally, that your tests have been negative, you feel fine, and the fears are coming from an external stimulus. Severe and persistent fears, however, should prompt a consultation with a mental health professional.

## Spanish-Language Magazines Donated to Shivers

Carolyn Wilson, a Cancer Connection volunteer since 2006, visits the Shivers Infusion Center every Monday to bring a bit of cheer to patients and their families. It's also a great opportunity for Carolyn to practice her Spanish, since a number of Shivers clients do not speak English. On an early visit, Carolyn was chatting with Marissa Ramirez, a clerk at Brackenridge who helps out often in the infusion center, about the library available to clients. Marissa mentioned that a real need was reading material in Spanish.

Carolyn took that as a challenge and began calling local book stores and discovered that this was not as easy as she had thought. Each month, unsold magazines are stripped of their covers and destroyed, with the covers returned to publishers for credit.



As a group facilitator I noticed how group members frequently gave each other encouragement and kind words when one of its' members had a routine annual or bi-annual scan coming up, for they knew that this could lead to a sleepless night or two. They also shared a few laughs about the fear of having 'cancer of the elbow' when they got a bruise. While not everyone who is a cancer survivor will experience this kind of anxiety, about 70% of cancer survivors worry about cancer coming back. The fear of recurrence is normal. It is important for survivors to know that their concerns are not 'silly' and that help and support is available.

Steve Bercu, owner of BookPeople at 603 N. Lamar Blvd., was the only person who offered a solution. Even though BookPeople gets donation requests from charitable institutions all the time, Steve, a cancer survivor himself who keeps his eyes peeled for cancer-related causes, offered to donate Spanish-language magazines without covers for the Shivers library.

In September, Carolyn met with Jerome Huffor, magazine buyer at BookPeople, to pick up the first monthly donation consisting of multiple copies of three different mainstream magazines. Days later, she presented the magazines personally to Marissa at Shivers. Since then BookPeople has continued to supply Shivers with Spanish literature on a regular basis. Wish expressed...wish granted!

*Carolyn Wilson has been an active Cancer Connection Volunteer since 2005 time and a long time facilitator of the 'Living with Cancer' support group at TX Oncology Midtown*

## Blankets and Ribbons and Jars, Oh My!

"My mother was a minister, a counselor, a friend, and a confidant to many in our small community. When she passed away last year after a short battle with inflammatory breast cancer, I had no idea how to make sense of her death, or how to live out her benevolent legacy in my own life. I am not a minister; I have no formal training in counseling; I don't have any idea how to fundamentally change someone's life. But I try to keep in mind something she said to me once when I was going through a rough patch: 'Do at least one small kindness for someone every day. It doesn't have to be monumental, but if someone has an easier or better day because of you, you will never have a wasted day.'"

*Susan Geist - Cancer Connection Volunteer*



And that was the foundation for the creation of the 'Jars of Hope' project. Cancer can be such a difficult lonely journey at times, and this project really embodies the Cancer Connection motto "You are not alone". Each 'Jar of Hope' is filled with inspirational statements from cancer survivors and caregivers and lovingly decorated by a member of the local volunteer community. The jars are then distributed to current cancer patients, who can draw a note of support from the jar whenever they are feeling down and need encouragement from someone who has been in their shoes.

A heartfelt thank you to the community for the tremendous response to our 'Jars of Hope' program. We have received many sincere and uplifting words of wisdom from caregivers and survivors alike, that we have been able to place in the jars (and always welcome more). Recently volunteers have provided the materials for, and made, over 200 hundred Jars of Hope, dozens of blankets and countless Awareness Ribbons for patients and caregivers at local Texas Oncology centers, Shivers Cancer Center and area hospitals. A special thanks to the Round Rock Youth, employees of the LCRA and Dell employees for their creativity and hard work. If you would like to be involved in a Cancer Connection Community Project please call 512 342 0233.



## The Healing Power of Story by Linda Conner LCSW

On Sunday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, a unique group of individuals came together to share their experience as volunteers actively engaged with the One-On-One Mentoring program of Cancer



Connection. Each volunteer has experienced cancer deeply and personally. As survivors they have come forward to assist others and are matched with a care receiver currently fighting cancer. They accompany others with encouragement and a level of understanding that only someone who has experienced cancer truly can. Respecting the personal nature of the journey, one of the most precious gifts they offer their care receiver is the gift of attentive listening. Cancer Connection volunteer and local psychotherapist, Linda Conner, led us in an intimate conversation on listening and storytelling:

"We are all storytellers and story-listeners. We come from a past where stories were an active part of life. Stories were used to teach, to bring healing and for enjoyment. When was the last time you told your story? And when was the last time you listened, really listened to another's story?"

So many of us do not know our own story. A story about who we are, not what we have done. About what we have faced to build, what we have built. What we have drawn upon and risked to do it, what we have felt, thought, feared and discovered through the events of our lives. The real story that belongs to us

alone. These stories are seen in our own way and have a part of ourselves in them.

The best stories have many meanings and we can appreciate how their meaning changes as our capacity to understand changes. As we revisit such stories over the years, we wonder how we could not have seen their present meaning all along.

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another is to listen. Just Listen. What a precious gift-our attention. Witness the story they rode in on. Allow it to change over time. Listen generously, no need to ask for explanations. In the end, people find they are able to belong just as they are. And in this safe place they can become whole again. A loving silence often has more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words.

I encourage you to find a friend and practice telling your story and listening to their story. Notice how it changes over time. It might be interesting to tell/listen to a story of how yours or someone else's disease process began. And as we start to notice our view of how things began, we can start to imagine alternatives to the path we are following, perhaps even finding a route toward wellness."

*Linda Conner is a LCSW in private practice for 30 years. A part of her general psychotherapy practice is dedicated to working with people in disease process, especially cancer survivors and their families. Linda has developed and taught programs in stress management, guided imagery, communication skills and wellness.*

# Volunteer Spotlight



## Andrew Wong - Texas Oncology Midtown



Andrew became a Cancer Connection Volunteer in December of 2010 and currently visits with patients and their caregivers at Texas Oncology Midtown. We asked Andrew to tell us a little bit about himself and how he got involved with Cancer Connection:

“Currently: I am a senior at the University of Texas at Austin studying biomedical engineering and I would like to attend medical school. My career goals are not clearly defined, but I would like to specialize in oncology and conduct "bench to bedside" research on cancer prevention.

During college, I had joined organizations and participated in volunteering. However, for years I had

been seeking an activity which I both enjoyed and felt that I was able to contribute - a cause that I was passionate about. From the first training day, I knew Cancer Connection was a great fit for me.

My teenage years were characterized by my father's struggle against a late stage liver cancer. He passed from cancer in 2005 after battling it for two and a half years. At Cancer Connection, I found a group of strong and positive individuals who had gone through my similar hardships, and were dedicated to supporting others who were going through an experience that no one wants to go through. Simply stated, I joined Cancer Connection because I support what they do.

In addition to volunteering my favorite interests are basketball - I am a big fan of the Dallas Mavericks – photography and spending time with family and friends.”

## Helen Minas Schneider – Texas Oncology Kyle

I became a Cancer Connection volunteer in 2010 after deciding that since I had survived breast cancer, I should be able to give some comfort and hope to those on their current journey.

After completing my volunteer training I was teamed up with another Cancer Connection volunteer to visit cancer patients at Seton Main for about a year. I have also been matched with two lovely caregivers who supported relatives during their cancer battles. Currently I am visiting patients and their caregiver at Texas Oncology in Kyle.

My own personal philosophy is that the journey is the most important part of the often dark cancer experience. Not everyone survives, but to participate in providing hope is such a privilege. We are part of the human race until we breathe our last breath. We all need kind words, friends, and loved ones to surround us. You may never know what words helped encourage or what words offered hope. The love communicates and that is all that really matters.



## We ♥ Volunteers!

### ***Survivors Needed for February Training***

Cancer Connection's next volunteer training is scheduled for Feb 10th and 11th. If you or a friend may be interested in attending, please call (512) 342-0233 or visit [www.TheCancerConnection.org](http://www.TheCancerConnection.org). Our volunteers help other survivors and family members of survivors by serving as one-on-one matches, oncology center volunteers, and hospital volunteers. Don't miss this exciting opportunity to get involved!



### ***Thank You Mamma Jamma Volunteers***

Thank you to team *Cancer Connection* and our ride volunteers for participating in the 2011 *Mamma Jamma Ride to Leave Behind Breast Cancer!* The ride was a great success and we are grateful to be a ride beneficiary.



**Cancer Connection**  
You're not alone.

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## Congratulations Class #33

Cancer Connection volunteer class #33 graduated on September 24<sup>th</sup> 2011. Chances are you may have already said hello to one of them if you if you have been over to Texas Oncology South, Balcones and Midtown recently.

Each one of these volunteers has had their own life intimately touched by cancer and is looking forward to sharing the wisdom and compassion grown from their own experiences with those who are currently facing the cancer journey.

We would like to thank Central Market, Brick Oven Pizza on Red River and Starbucks on Guadalupe for generously providing food and drink for the training.



We would also like to thank class participant Alice Mueller for her wonderful baked items – she is amazing! You can check out her blog ‘This Home Plate – Biking and Baking Beyond Breast Cancer’ at <http://www.thishomeplate.com/>

*Welcome Class #33: Wanda Davis, Nancy Burnett, Patrick Harper, Susan Ingraham, Alice Mueller, Wendy Snider, Katie Lopes, Beatriz Seda, Maira Rucoba, Jean King and Mariana Garza*



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