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A Light in the Darkness: Tree of Hope 2022

December 6, 2022
By: Julie Poucher Harbin, Senior Writer, DCI

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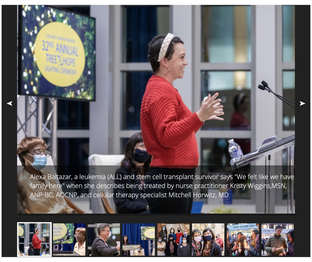

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WATCH the Facebook-Live Stream. (event begins at about the 9-minute mark) ** Stay tuned for a packaged video later this week on the DCI YouTube channel.*

For the first time in three years, cancer patients, survivors, families, friends, caregivers, clinicians, faculty, and staff joined together at the Duke Cancer Center and adjacent Seese-Thornton Garden of Tranquility for the annual Tree of Hope Ceremony, held Dec. 2.

About 200 people attended the event in person and more than 400 attended virtually.

A special program inside Duke Cancer Center — during which cancer support leaders and providers shared their experiences as DCI employees in service to cancer patients, and as cancer survivors shared their experiences as DCI patients — was followed by the traditional lighting of candles and a procession outside to the tree. There, attendees were greeted by an interlude of joyous music from the Duke University Chorale.

Duke Cancer Institute Chief Administrator Robin Famiglietti, PhD, welcomed all to the Tree of Hope ceremony in the Seese-Thornton Garden of Tranquility.

"Tonight we are surrounded by hundreds of luminaries shining brightly in honor of providers, patients, survivors, caregivers, and those who live on only in our memories. Let us have a moment of silence for them as we let their love and light shine in the darkness that's around us," she said. "For every patient, survivor, friend, family member, and caregiver who has been touched by cancer, what you've been through or are going through is daunting. You are not alone. We are here with you, by your side, and by the side of your loved ones. Let us listen. Let us be a support for you. Our medical family therapists, child-life specialists, psychologists, navigators, providers, and so many more are available to help you through the unexpected, to guide you when the going gets tough, and to help you live your best life possible."

She continued: "I have witnessed our providers and staff in Durham and Wake County and our Duke Cancer Network sites who work tirelessly to ensure that extraordinary care is delivered even through these challenging times. Our researchers continue to bring innovative treatments forward. Our devoted supportive care providers and staff attend to critical services impacting quality of life. Our staff, our clinical teams, and the hard-working individuals who clean and maintain our centers do so with a special purpose. It is this dedication, compassion, and dependence on hope, that connects us all. Together we partner with you to make DCI the best place for cancer care, a sanctuary in the troubling and unpredictable storm that is cancer; a place of hope in a world of uncertainty. In the face of metastatic breast cancer, Eli, who spoke tonight shared that hope helps her look to the future. Her 12-year-old son said that to him, hope means possibilities. No matter where you draw your hope from — whether it's your gratitude for living in this moment, the work of your clinicians on your behalf, the support of your counselor, family, friends, or your faith, it can be your beacon of light that outshines the surrounding darkness just like the Tree of Hope."

Alexa Balthazar, leukemia and stem cell transplant survivor, in her own words

on her cancer-treatment providers:

"I started oral chemo but it was determined that I need to get a bone marrow transplant I met Dr. Horowitz and he is phenomenal. He just puts me at ease and knowing that you're in really good hands and that he has a plan was incredibly encouraging. It really put faith in me that I'm doing the right thing. I'm getting through this. Once I was discharged, I became under the care of Kristi Wiggins, who is an NP (nurse practitioner) for Dr. Horowitz. And she's phenomenal. I love her…having that personable piece to your providers is really huge. Since I arrived at Duke, everything was phenomenal. We felt like we had family here."

on her counselors and support network:

"I was connected with Jackie who was a nurse navigator and she helped put me in touch with the right people. And so immediately I was able to have a therapist Geoff (Vaughn), and that's been amazing because what you're going through is traumatic you are not going through normal life things and to be able to talk to somebody who's not a family member, not a friend, about very serious topics was helpful. I encourage people to go to therapy because a lot of people stigmatize it as (being) for mental illness, that something is wrong. No, it's to keep you going. It's to keep you ahead of the curve. It's to keep you ready to roll with life's punches."

"I encourage people who are going through treatment not to just think about the clinical piece but think about you as a person because Duke has resources for that and they can help you find my hope through gratitude. My husband, my parents, all of us just decided from day one, we're going to express gratitude to get through this. So that means being thankful for things — being thankful for my supporting husband, being thankful for my family, being thankful I live so close to a facility like Duke to get treatment. I am so thankful—thankful that someone decades ago thought about a bone marrow transplant to cure leukemia, being able to think about what I'm thankful for, rather than what I've lost or how this is an unfortunate situation. It really provides hope to me and knowing that each day is going to be better than the last day is really the way we've been surviving."

on on-site therapy:

"I also encourage young adults, if they're thinking of potentially starting a family someday to look into fertility preservation, I worked with Duke's fertility oncology program to actually preserve embryos. So we were lucky enough that we have some embryos on ice right now. So someday we could start a family if we'd like."

"I was also fortunate to be able to connect with Rebecca Sheby, who does sex therapy and again, that's something I wasn't really comfortable with. I wasn't sure about, but oh my gosh, has that been a godsend. It's been such a life saver. She talks about the things some of us might be ashamed to talk about, because your body goes through a lot of changes during cancer treatment. And talking with her she's pointed me in the right direction many times and it's helped my sex life.

Angela Brock, two-year stage 3 colorectal cancer survivor, in her own words

on support programs and medical family therapy:

"One of the very first things they told me when I when they said that I had cancer is to worry and the very first thing that you do is start to panic, because you don't know how you're going to pay these bills. The programs that you really, really need are the ones that should be really focused on in the very beginning of your cancer diagnosis, like Patrick (Plumeri) who is my therapist. Anybody in my family or my friends can tell you, 'Hey, she looks forward to talking to Patrick.' I just know and I have this reassuring feeling that Patrick is there and that he is willing to listen to me, that he listens to me as an individual and not just as a patient."

"Just can't live without those services. Duke is a top notch Cancer Center. They offer a lot of programs; they treat you very well. They cater to you. I think they spoil you more so than than you would if you were in your own home with your own family. They take care of their own."

on smoking cessation:

"I was a smoker. I smoked for over 40 years and they have a program to even help you stop smoking and I had no idea that even existed. Oh my goodness, Kelly (Young), she was right there. She never left me."

on her care team:

*"Three words that would describe my care team would be the first would be **transparency**, **caring** (first two words). My care team is very, very caring. They listen to me. They're concerned with me as the whole person. and not just a patient. The third one would be lots of **love**. My care team has lots of love, whether they show it outwardly or whether they show it just with the medicines and the prescriptions and the time that they spend with their patients."*

on Hope:

"There's hope. You know, don't always look at your situation as 'this is the end.' Nobody knows the end story but you and Christ. I get my hope from Christ. I get my hope from God. That's how I get my hope, from people around me, they give me encouragement. Like I said, everybody has a different story. But I get my strength from Christ."

Eli Levene, six-year breast cancer survivor, in her own words:

a no-brainer:

"When I was going through my first cancer diagnosis, the reason I chose Duke, it was out of convenience because I live in Durham.
But through my treatment process, I have really gained a lot of knowledge about Duke. As I started my treatment here and through the years, I really admire Duke for the research-to-practice here, and the innovation that's happening here. I really like that it's a teaching hospital and a teaching cancer center, because the learning and the growing cannot stop. Being with Kirkpatrick (radiation oncologist John Kirkpatrick) is so joyful that I tend to forget this a serious moment. Even in the most serious moments, when I have tumors in my brain. He is able to communicate in a way that's very scientific: 'It's a no brainer because we're going to do SRS radiation, and that should clear it up.'"

"When I think about my care at Duke, since I have metastatic cancer, and I'm in chronic cancer treatment and extended treatment, there's been many moments over the past six years that come to my mind when I think about Duke and the treatment here. Everybody, even the people that check you in are so present in the moment and that really makes a difference. When someone is newly diagnosed with cancer, when I find out that they're going to Duke, I definitely tell them about the resources that have benefited me and everything that happens is kind of put out through the Cancer Patient Support Program."

on psychological support:

"When I was first diagnosed with cancer in 2016, I was immediately put in with connected to a counselor. And then I was connected to a psychologist that has been my psychologist since 2016."

on child-life specialist services:

"Taking my children to see gene Hartford Todd and connecting my children to any kind of resources they might need, the therapy that one receives, not only the person going through cancer but their caregivers, is very high quality."

on choosing life over cancer:

"I think choosing life over cancer, the darkness of living instead of the diagnosis of cancer is because I have such a strong support system at Duke. I can't really do anything about cancer, but I can do something about whether exercise or not, or whether I eat like something terrible or something good. You know that process is about me being able to choose different things and kind of let the cancer experts worry about like whatever's happening in the cancer world."

on Hope:

"I think I find my hope in my family and especially in my children. I asked my son last night, he's 12 years old, 'What does hope mean to you?' And the answer he gave me was, 'the possibilities.' And so I think hope is very forward-thinking, forward-moving, and I think that the Tree of Hope is ongoing, and it's forever and it's always learning and building and evolving into being something that's really special for the people in this community."

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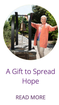

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