I lost my Mom three years ago to an eight-year bout with ovarian cancer that spread to her brain. I remember getting the news about her ovarian cancer like it was yesterday. It was the summer of 2000 and I had just finished my junior year of college. I was planning to go to London with one of my best friends to do an internship. That summer, before I left, my Mom was experiencing severe constipation and back pain. I didn’t know this until later, but she also was experiencing other symptoms such as bleeding. Before we knew what it was, we all joked about the mineral oil the doctor suggested for her constipation and the 15 other natural remedies to get her system moving. My Mom had such a sense of humor and was a jokester most the time. My Mom already had been through stage IV Hodgkin disease with six weeks to live, so when she had defeated that, the thought of another cancer didn’t seem even possible. My Mom and Dad encouraged me to go to London and assured me that everything was fine. I had that gut feeling it wasn’t, but I got on that plane to London anyway.

A couple weeks into the trip, I got the phone call from my parents. I remember standing in the small living room of our London flat, facing the front porch and talking on the phone that sat on a small circular table. My parents told me it was ovarian cancer and I burst into tears. I felt so helpless being so far away and I was so scared. My parents encouraged me to stay and that everything would be fine. My Mom’s oncologist for her Hodgkin disease had recommended Beth Karlan, MD, to do her surgery and assured us she was the best of the best. My Mom had her surgery and I stayed in London another couple of weeks but I felt so miserable being so far away. I just wanted to be with my Mom and family, so I ended my London trip early and came home.

For the next eight years, my Mom battled ovarian cancer like a true warrior and hero. She never complained. She even often said how ovarian cancer had “been kind to her.” We all know that was because of the compassionate and extraordinary care she received from Dr. Karlan, Paula Anastasia, RN, MN, AOCN®, and the entire team at the Women’s Cancer Program (WCP) at the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute. Thanks to Dr. Karlan, she was able to experience a year here and there without having to do any treatment. She went to Switzerland with friends and traveled to Las Vegas and Hawaii—she had always lived life to the fullest and didn’t want to let this cancer stop her.

I can’t say enough about the oncology nurses. My mom always raved about the incredible care and love she received from all her nurses. As a patient, a nurse is someone you spend more time with than anyone else in the hospital. A nurse is who you call when you have a question, a concern, or just need a shoulder to cry on. I got to see firsthand what an extraordinary positive impact the nurses had on my Mom’s health, well-being, and life as a whole. I am forever grateful to each and every one of them.

Running for a Reason

In 2002, I began my schooling to get my master’s degree in sport management. For my thesis, I decided to create a marketing and operations plan for a 5k run/walk for ovarian cancer. I am a runner, so I often did these events and recognized how effective they were in raising money and awareness for a cause. When my Mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, I learned that no reliable test exists for ovarian cancer. I also learned how the symptoms, such as constipation and bloating, often mimic those of other common conditions, so they often are missed by not only women, but doctors, too.

When I graduated, I decided I wanted to pursue putting this thesis into action. The most important part was establishing where I would want the money to go. With the care my Mom was getting from Dr. Karlan, Paula, and that entire WCP group, it was an easy decision. I pitched (and took my Dad with me) the concept to the vice president of community relations at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. It was a long shot because Cedars-Sinai had never done a public event before. To our grateful surprise, however, they agreed to partner up! Now, seven years later, run for her® has almost 5,000 participants and has raised almost $4 million for the Cedars-Sinai WCP at the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute.

Kelli Sargent, BA, MA, is the founder of the run for her® and the senior event coordinator in Community Relations and Development at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, both in Los Angeles, CA. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article. The content of this article has been reviewed to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author or editorial staff.

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My Mom was the spokesperson for run for her for the first three years and crossed the finish line each year. As much strength as she gave to others, she always said she got double that in return. She thought if she could bottle up the strength and love she received from others that it would be the best medicine ever.

In 2009, run for her launched a new campaign called Sleepwalkers Across America™. A Sleepwalker is someone who lives out of town, has a prior engagement, or just doesn’t want to wake up early to participate. run for her mails all Sleepwalkers a signature t-shirt and socks in the mail before the event and encourages them to do their own run for her walks with their friends and family. Last year, our goal was to get at least one Sleepwalker registered in every state. We accomplished that goal and even had Sleepwalkers registered in nine foreign countries and team walks in New York, NY, Chicago, IL, Miami, FL, and Austin, TX! This year, our goal is to get at least one Sleepwalker Team in every state.

Smiling to the End

My Mom had started to experience dizziness, difficulty walking and writing, slurred speech, and headaches. We soon learned her ovarian cancer had spread to her brain. She went through a couple months of radiation and kept a smile on the whole time—and her make-up, too! Somehow, she always tried to make us feel like everything was okay and it sure worked. She ultimately had to be in a wheelchair and could do little on her own (except somehow she still managed to make sure to always have her make-up on). To this day, her smile through the entire journey awes me and brings me gratitude beyond belief that I got to have this amazingly special person as my Mom and my best friend.

Making an Impact

If we had known the signs of ovarian cancer or if a reliable test had existed, my Mom would be alive today. I miss my Mom every day and so wish she didn’t have to go through a battle that most likely could have been prevented if there was simply a test or more awareness of the disease. Together, I know we can make an impact on this disease. The goal is that run for her can contribute to all the efforts of those with the same goal of creating awareness, raising money, and providing a outlet for people to share their experiences, cry, laugh, and be healthy all at the same time. I have met some of the most courageous people through run for her; people who have showed me extraordinary strength, courage, love, and hope beyond comprehension.

My Mom would always say, “Feel me in your heart pocket.” She would say this to me or anyone close to her that needed some of her extra-special love, strength, and comfort when she couldn’t be present. I feel blessed that each and every day I feel her in my heart pocket.

Do You Have an Touching Story to Share?

Heart of Oncology Nursing provides readers with a look at the compassionate and emotional aspect of oncology nursing. Length should be no more than 1,000–1,500 words, exclusive of tables, figures, insets, and references. If interested, contact Associate Editor Mallori Hooker, RN, MSN, NP-C, AOCNP®, at hookerm@slhs.org.

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