

The Value of a Good Oncologist?

Priceless When He Gives You the Shirt Off His Back

By Amy Norton

Ask a cancer patient to name the hardest part of battling their disease, and very often they'll tell you it's the waiting. Long, seemingly endless hours spent waiting for appointments, treatment or results. So many complicated steps on the journey from diagnosis to survivorship. All punctuated with waiting.

Mary Rogers knows something about all that waiting. And at 77, having just celebrated her birthday along with her last radiation treatment for head and neck cancer, Mary knows the importance of making the journey one step



at a time. She also knows firsthand that fighting cancer is easier when physicians like her oncologist, Dr. Paul Schilling of the Community Cancer Center of North Florida (CCCNF), put patient care first.

Mary is the mother of five grown children, retired now after a twenty-year career as a social worker. A glass-of-lemonade-half-full kind of person, Mary understands the value of putting a positive spin on difficult circumstances. She says she began her career at 40 after finding herself unexpectedly divorced at mid-life and needing a job. Two years, one master's degree and lots of hard work later, Mary was ready to begin the next phase of her life and says "whether it was working with abused children or elderly people, I never had a job I didn't like." Certainly, she was no stranger to hard work, and without doubt her positive outlook has served her well facing the especially hard work of fighting cancer.

Although originally from the Chicago area, home for Mary is the quiet island community of Cedar Key, Florida. Situated directly on the Gulf, an easy hour's drive southwest of Gainesville, Cedar Key is the perfect place to while away a well-earned retirement. Unless, that is, you find yourself facing a serious illness. The silver lining for Mary rested in five loving children (all ready to pitch in and help mom), a comprehensive, world-class cancer treatment center nearby, and one remarkably dedicated doctor leading the way.

Rarely sick over her lifetime, Mary and her primary care physician grew concerned when a sore throat didn't resolve after two nagging months during the spring of 2009. Referred to an ear, nose and throat specialist for a closer look, Mary underwent a biopsy, suspicious the diagnosis would be cancer, given her symptoms and admitted history as a smoker.

Hearing those three menacing words, "you have cancer" was hard. Learning that the location of her kidney bean-sized tumor happened to be one of the most difficult areas of the body to treat didn't make her feel much better, either. However, being the can-do person she is, upon a referral in June to Dr. Schilling and CCCNF, Mary began her battle in earnest.

Armor On, Battle-Ready

Every warrior needs weapons and a mentor for the battle ahead. (Think Luke Skywalker, light sabers and Yoda, from the Star Wars movies.) And while fighting cancer comes with its own unique set of challenges, the right medicine and health care provider can make a big difference in a patient's outcome, both physical and emotional.

“Our cancer patients deserve world-class treatment and care.”

PAUL J. SCHILLING, M.D.

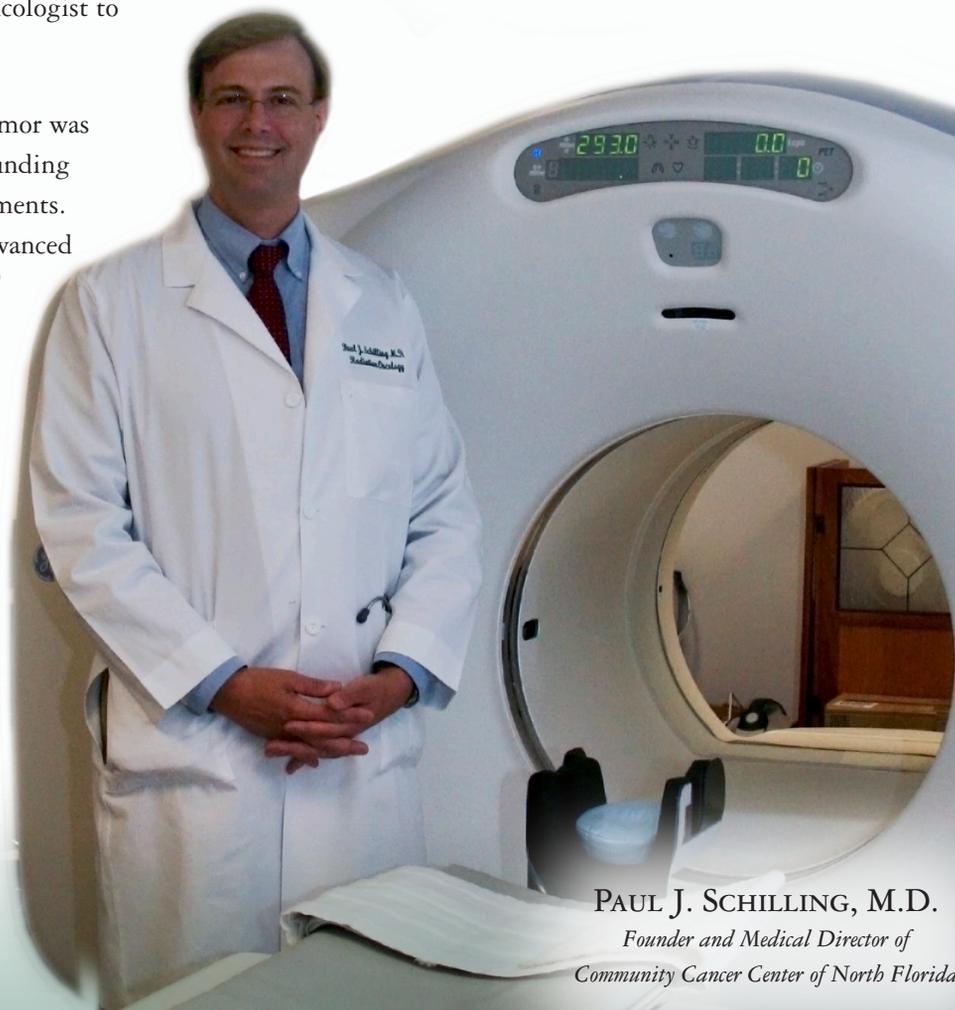
*Founder and Medical Director of
Community Cancer Center of North Florida*

Mary's weapons have come in the form of radiation therapy, targeted to her tumor's exact location and metered out in fifteen minute increments, five days in a row over a span of eight weeks. Forty treatments in all, involving a highly trained squadron of radiation oncology nurses, radiation therapists, dosimetrists (who regulate dosage of radiation) and medical physicists (who calibrate the machines delivering the radiation), all working in concert with the radiation oncologist to deliver the best treatment possible.

Determining the exact location of her tumor was important to minimize damage to surrounding healthy tissue during the radiation treatments. To accomplish this Dr. Schilling used advanced imaging technology known as a PET/CT scan, or Positron Emission Tomography/Computed Tomography as it's called in scientific parlance. Useful in both diagnosis and in treatment planning, PET/CT is cutting-edge technology designed to determine the extent of the disease, as well as the best course of treatment. Mary's take on this new technology? "When I saw my PET/CT results, it made me happy to see only one little red area show up in my neck [which is how the tumor appears on the scan], and not anywhere else in my body."

Her treatment protocol even included a customized suit of armor in the form of an Aquaplast mask. Designed to fit the contours of her head and neck, this medical-grade mesh was used to keep Mary in the same, perfectly still position during each round of treatment to insure that the radiation was zeroed in on her tumor and nowhere else.

Fortunately, given that Mary had to make a two-hour round trip commute to the cancer center for daily treatment, she found it helpful to have all the necessary diagnostic and treatment services located under one roof. And it was icing on the cake to find everyone so accommodating and compassionate. "I never felt like a number on a chart," Mary says, "and I appreciated having easy access to the doctors, as well as quick responses to my questions." She adds that she was pleasantly surprised to find that it did not take weeks to schedule her initial appointment with Dr. Schilling, noting that "three days after receiving my diagnosis, I was in his office."



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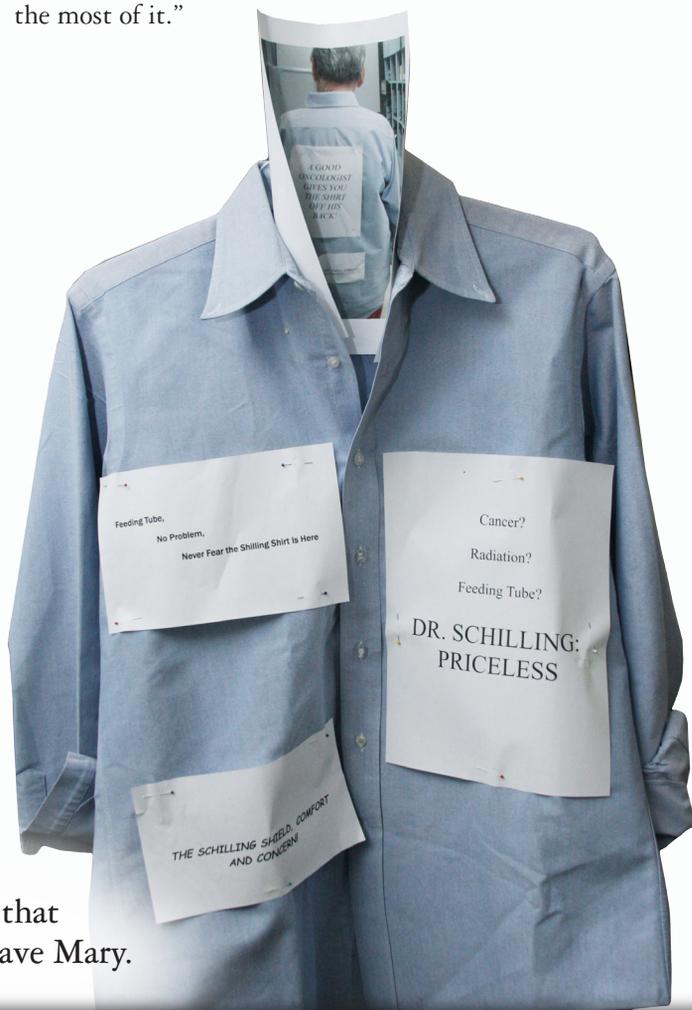
Good Mentor, Good Medicine

When asked about her experience at CCCNF, Mary says, “I was well cared for by Dr. Schilling and all of his staff. During my regular weekly appointments, he always took time to address my concerns, and I felt like he really listened to me.” She tells a great story about a time he went beyond the call of duty to help her in an unexpected way: “I take pride in my appearance and was concerned about the feeding tube [which was necessary to insure proper nutrition] showing underneath my clothing. Dr. Schilling told me the tube wouldn’t be noticeable, but it was visible and consequently, I was frustrated. On my second day of treatment, I shared my disappointment, after which he said ‘Hold on a minute,’ and left the exam room. He returned with one of his own shirts, starched and fresh from the cleaners, and handed it to me saying, ‘Here. Take my shirt. That’ll solve the problem for today.’ Such a kind gesture. I’ll never forget it.”

During her last week of treatment, Mary returned the favor in-kind, surprising Dr. Schilling by wearing his shirt embellished with her own gesture of appreciation. Notes saying such things as “a good oncologist gives you the shirt off his back,” which she pinned to the shirt, were her way of saying thanks for taking care of more than just her medical needs. That small gift of a shirt spoke volumes, not only acknowledging the indignities that often accompany cancer treatment, but the person wearing it.

The shirt that
Dr. Schilling gave Mary.

Now that radiation is over, Mary still has some waiting to do. It will take some time to recuperate from the inevitable fatigue resulting from treatment, and it will be six weeks before she sees Dr. Schilling for a follow up. But even with the waiting, she resolves to enjoy where she is as long as she is able, “I’ve learned to take one day at a time. That’s all anybody’s got and you’ve got to make the most of it.”



Honoring the Cancer Journey: *Lilly Oncology on Canvas Art Opening at CCCNF*

At Community Cancer Center of North Florida, we know artistic expression provides a wonderful outlet for some patients and loved ones dealing with the roller coaster of emotions during cancer treatment. Whether it’s composing poetry, painting or even embellishing a shirt with thank you notes, as patient Mary Rogers did,

channeling creative energy into something tangible is a viable way to process feelings about cancer. In support of those artistic pursuits, on September 24, CCCNF hosted an art opening showcasing some of the winning entries from the *Lilly Oncology on Canvas: Expressions of a Cancer Journey* art competition and exhibition.