



Winter 2023, Vol. 59

# Bridges

Connecting Cancer Survivors

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Memorial Sloan Kettering  
Cancer Center

# From the Editor

By Eileen F. Gould



**The holidays are always a time of reflection. It is hard to believe that we are closing a third year affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic.**

For people with cancer and cancer survivors, staying one step ahead of COVID is not easy. We already struggle with stress and concern about

germs, the regular flu, and just being sick with everyday viruses. COVID adds another layer of worry while trying to live our lives in the **World of Cancer**. As more and more people resume activities of gathering together and traveling to celebrate the holidays, many of us still need to be cautious and extra careful — even sometimes missing

family and friends' celebrations or long-planned trips.

As 2022 comes to a close, we are very grateful at MSK for the dedicated care and efforts to make patients' health and safety the No. 1 priority during this ongoing pandemic.

The *Bridges* Team would like to thank everyone who makes the newsletter come to fruition each issue. And as we enter the 15th year of publication, we look forward to sharing many more stories of **Hope and Survival**.

If you would like to share your story or receive an email copy of *Bridges*, please visit [www.mskcc.org/bridges](http://www.mskcc.org/bridges). *Bridges* is now printed on recycled paper and, as always, is available online.

## Where Are They Now? My Angel, Still Going Strong

By Paul Sanford and Dolores Sanford

**This is an update to one of MSK's greatest success stories. I wrote for *Bridges* in 2013 about my wife's fight and success.** My wife, Dolores, was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in 2001 that had spread from her colon through her midriff and into her lymph nodes. After finding Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK), the battle started. In 2008, the cancer came back. But with MSK and treatment, the cancer went away in 2009 and has not been back since. Today — 22 years since her first diagnosis — I'm glad to report that Dolores is doing great.

I'm happy to say her gardens are beautiful. She stays strong with her garden work and by taking good care of her 101-year-old mom, both remarkable women with strong faith and belief in prayer. All this could not have been possible without the help of MSK, the power of prayer, and the great team that surrounded her.

An update on myself: I am participating in a golf tournament in Melbourne, Australia, where donations can be made to MSK. I remain a proud husband to my wife.

**Dolores was always a fighter and remains one to this day!**



**Paul** is retired. He has been with his wife, **Dolores**, for 57 years. It has been 10 years since their story was published in *Bridges* (v.19, winter 2013).



# Survivor Insights: Similarities Between COVID-19 and Cancer Life Adjustment

“ As a cancer survivor, I have a heightened awareness and appreciation of the importance to follow the recommendations of my doctor at MSK and the CDC guidelines in light of the changing and dynamic environment of COVID-19. Their advice is based on science and experience, and they haven't failed me yet! So, I willingly embrace and follow the precautionary steps necessary to ensure that my health is maintained. I am definitely more risk averse, but I still lead a normal life as best I can.

As the saying goes, I try not to sweat the small stuff ... as much as I am able! What may have caused me anxiety in the past is now not worth the stress, anxiety, or impact that they may have on my happiness and enjoyment of what life has to offer. My life as a cancer survivor, and the experiences that I had while battling the disease, have tempered — and to some degree, mitigated — my overall anxiety.

By no means am I lulled into a false sense of security, but my anxiety level is very manageable. My battles fighting cancer have definitely accentuated the appreciation that I have for life. In short, my desire to live a fulfilling and happy life supersedes the anxieties that arise from life's challenges.

I learned that the unknown is exactly that: unknown. I never thought that I would get cancer, but cancer happened. So, there are times when I just accept the fact that there are unknown things, like cancer, that I can try my best to avoid and mitigate but are simply out of my control. In the case of COVID-19, I have relied on scientists, doctors, and God to help prepare me for the possible outcomes that arise from whatever COVID-19 and the unknown throw my way.

I am less nervous and more cautious but lead a normal life, while not consumed by whatever unknowns are yet to come.” —Tom

“ I had my bone marrow transplant in December 2019. It was a normal routine for me to be hibernating at home. COVID-19 was just an extension of my recovery. The pandemic allowed me to recover quicker, and it was easier because the world joined me and I wasn't alone. I won my battle. As a nation, we are stronger and more families are resilient. 'Viva la vida' is my motto every day. Just live life and enjoy it!” —Elle

“ ‘Resilient.’ In a word, resiliency has helped maintain my balance through COVID and as a cancer survivor. The COVID-variants ups and downs parallel the specter and ‘unknown perhaps’ of cancer returning. Keeping busy, along with exercise, has helped me in managing anxiety. I would like to say I was better at it, but it's a constant challenge. Lastly, when my dog takes me for a walk, it helps taking a deep yoga Ujjayi breath!” —Bruce

“ Mindfulness and meditation have really helped me throughout both my survivorship and COVID-19. Cancer has prepared me for the unknown by just being able to go with the flow and adjusting as needed. During an experience with cancer and COVID 19, there is not much we can control. So I try and find a sense of control in a pretty uncontrollable situation. I can't change the cards I'm dealt, but I can choose to live life to the fullest, make informed and educated decisions about what works best for me and my health, and not let anything in life get me down. We only live once, and I plan to live it so once is enough.” — Lauren

# Miracle Me

By Julia Gutierrez

**It was a Tuesday, on March 25, 2014 — my sophomore year in high school — when I was called out of my last-period class because my mom was picking me up ... very much out of the ordinary.** I got in the car and was told we were going to the hospital to biopsy my right shoulder. A week prior, I had an MRI because of pain that I would feel when playing softball. Never did I think that pain would be cancer.

Wednesday, March 26, 2014, I was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in my right shoulder, which metastasized to both lungs. After one round of chemotherapy, I was transferred to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. In addition to 10 months of intense chemotherapy treatment, I underwent reconstructive surgery of my right arm, leaving me with significantly reduced mobility, as well as two thoracotomies. This was by far the hardest battle in my life; many friends were lost and there were activities I could no longer participate in, but I persevered and continued my fight with resilience.

In 2016, I graduated high school with my graduating class and had the honor of being named prom queen. I had been accepted into New York University to study biology on the premedical track — but all my dreams came to an abrupt pause when cancer returned to my lungs.

This time, I was placed on a clinical trial and all-around felt much better than I did when receiving chemotherapy. I completed treatment with my head held high and celebrated five years cancer free in January of 2022. I am grateful for my health today and give tremendous thanks to my sarcoma team for giving me a third chance at life.

I discovered my passion and calling while undergoing cancer

treatment. My oncologist's devotion to their patients inspired me to one day become a passionate, caring physician who is able to make a difference in the lives of others. I hope to use my story, along with the experiences that I have gained, to help comfort other patients and their families.

I graduated from NYU in May of 2021 and since then have been conducting research, shadowing, and volunteering all in the same institution that once treated me. My most rewarding experience occurred when I was shadowing. The oncologist was discussing future treatment plans to the parents of a patient who was in postoperative care. The father asked a rather personal question that I could tell the oncologist had difficulty answering. Because I am not the physician, I usually don't step into patient conversations, but this time I felt it was necessary. I told my story and gave my advice to these parents who so desperately wanted the best for their child.

**The mother then said to me: “Thank you. You are going to be a great doctor someday. I wish my child was awake right now to hear you speak.” In that very moment, I found my purpose. I was destined to treat children with cancer and provide comfort through my own personal journey.**

**Julia Gutierrez** is a New York University graduate who plans to go to medical school, aspiring to become a pediatric oncologist. In her free time, she enjoys trying new restaurants around New York City, exercising, and spending time with family and friends.



## Resource Review:

# Martial Arts

By Malik Cadwell

**“Martial arts” is an umbrella term for the many practices developed globally thousands of years ago for combat and self-defense, formulated and refined to achieve peak physical, mental, and spiritual growth.**

As civilization grew, martial arts expanded beyond training for warriors on the battlefield to organized methods of education and personal growth. The range of martial arts is as varied as the range of cultures around the world and has evolved to serve multiple purposes, such as sports, entertainment, law enforcement, military training, self-defense, and spiritual enlightenment. The founding warrior virtues of honor, loyalty, and dedication are inherent in martial arts. These qualities can be powerful guiding and motivating forces during challenging times in our lives, such as during cancer. They summon the will and fortitude to face adversity and challenges with an added sense of purpose, love, and service.

For people who have experienced cancer, martial arts can play an important role in staying connected to mind, body, and spirit whether you are newly diagnosed, undergoing treatment, in survivorship, or at the end of life. My student and friend, a third-degree black belt and karate instructor who was diagnosed with colon cancer, told me that, as he underwent treatment, one of his main goals was to get back to class and continue to

train and teach with his martial arts family. He credits his training for his physical and strength conditioning but also — most important — with his attitude, determination, and ability to focus and calm his mind. He feels a sense of purpose and loyalty to karate, his teacher (known as sensei), and the students. He continues to learn and grow and to facilitate that growth in others as a sensei himself. He asked me to teach him tai chi in his new journey as a cancer survivor and as a sensei. It's my honor to share these transformative practices with him and with others who are impacted by cancer.

My own teacher had cancer. His one desire and last wish was to continue training and teaching martial arts throughout his treatments and for me to carry on the tradition of his method. As a mind-body instructor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK), I carry forth my teacher's desire. I use methods and techniques from various martial arts and Qigong, including Tai Chi, Aikido, Karate, and Kung Fu with my students. The goal of all these practices is to strengthen and coordinate the mind, body, and spirit through meditation, mindfulness, visualization, guided imagery, traditional movement forms, and exercises.

In my classes through the MSK Integrative Medicine at Home online membership program and in one-on-one inpatient sessions in pediatrics, I see my students express a sense of pride, joy, and satisfaction in acquiring new physical skills. Therapeutically, I try to induce the rest-and-relaxation response to help them cope with their anxiety, stress, and pain. I often see people spark an interest, and many go on to study martial arts. Martial arts methods for calming and focusing the mind can be simple, fun, and open to people



**Malik Cadwell** is a grandmaster of martial arts with more than 43 years of experience, as well as 30 years of experience in behavioral and mental health counseling. As an MSK mind-body therapist, Malik shares practices and techniques from Karate, Aikido, Tai Chi, Kung Fu, and Qigong with the pediatric population. He engages adults in martial arts through the Integrative Medicine at Home membership program of online exercise and mind-body classes. In addition, Malik applies martial arts practices to engage diverse communities and raise awareness of integrative medicine.

of all ages. My hope is to share what I have learned to benefit those who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Join Malik each week to study martial arts in the MSK Integrative Medicine at Home membership program of online mind-body and exercise classes: [mskcc.org/AtHome](https://mskcc.org/AtHome).

# ‘There Is No Health Without Mental Health’

*Eliza Wierzbinska, patient, and Dr. Barnett, psychologist, reflect on their shared experience.*

By: Eliza Wierzbinska, MA, and Marie Barnett, PhD

**Eliza:** It is difficult to choose a beginning when I do not know what the ending will be. It was a seemingly normal day — I just finished the third year of my doctoral training and was turning 30 alongside two of my closest friends; we were planning an international trip together. But what followed was a phone call that changed the course of my life, like a tornado violently touching the ground. I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML)

and quickly started treatment with multiple chemotherapies, followed by a double umbilical cord stem cell transplant.

Three years later, I have learned new languages. The language of the medical world seemed to come in weight-bearing letters — WBC, MRI, ANC, GVHD, TBI, CT. In therapy, I developed an emotional language, where silences were pregnant with meaning. Each of these languages opened new ways of understanding.

There may be a hesitancy to begin psychotherapy while going through cancer — with its knowns and unknowns that followed — because of the fear that there are no words to say “it.” But one of my most meaningful moments with my psychologist, Dr. Barnett, was one where we did not exchange many words. I was too nauseated to speak that day, and Dr. Barnett asked, “Do you mind if I just sit with you?” We barely spoke throughout the session, but her presence during that time was therapeutic. Throughout therapy, you find the words to say “it” together, even if it be by sharing only a few words in a moment of silence.

Sometimes to understand life, you need to see it backwards. Start with right now, where perhaps there is no eloquent way to say “it,” but you learn another language in which to make meaning in your experience — you build the ability to endure it all as it comes.

**Dr. Barnett:** Start with right now, and the words you have today. Eliza describes eloquently how after diagnosis her life instantly was about staying alive, survival in a new world, and learning a new language. In psychotherapy, like cancer treatment, I find that one does not need to know all the questions, the right words, or language to understand and express their experience. Thoughtfully and diligently — while we both acknowledge it is not easy — Eliza finds ways through psychotherapy to understand her evolving body, goals, and values during transplant and after cancer treatment “ended.”

Eliza and I have been given a unique opportunity to work together during her transplant to today. Together, we strive — on good days



**Eliza Wierzbinska** is a sixth-year doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Adelphi University. She holds a master’s degree from Columbia University, where she focused on perinatal psychology. Her research and clinical interests concentrate on serious mental illness, women’s mental health, and maternal and reproductive psychology.

**Marie Barnett** is a clinical psychologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK). She has worked in the field of psychosocial oncology for more than seven years. She joined MSK’s Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Science in 2017, and works with children, adolescents, and young adults from diagnosis into survivorship.

■ Continued on page 7

# One of the Lucky Ones

By Christine VanLenten

I had a stomach pain and decided to check it out before going on a vacation. I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer the week before I was to go to the beach with my three sons and grandchildren. The doctor said to go and enjoy, and we would deal with it upon arriving home.

After the week where I enjoyed the kids (but didn't sleep, as the fear and anxiety were overwhelming), I returned home and saw my Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK) surgeon, who told me I was one of the lucky ones. He would perform the Whipple procedure in three weeks.

On the Friday before Labor Day, my son and husband drove me to New York, where I would have surgery. In hindsight, I don't believe I knew what was going to come.

My MSK surgeon performed the surgery, and I recovered in an unbelievably short amount of time. Five days later, I was home walking around and eating small meals. I was feeling positive that I was moving forward.

Six weeks later, I met with my MSK medical oncologist at the Bergen location. My children had conference calls with the doctor. My one son insisted on driving for a

face-to-face meeting, armed with a list of questions he had researched.

I began chemo six weeks after surgery to make sure all the cancer cells were gone. It was difficult, initially being nauseous for one week. The next week, I would feel almost normal — but then I would have an infusion again. By the time three months had passed, I was halfway done, and I returned to water exercise class each week. It was difficult, but I began slow.

It is now three years, and I am feeling good. I do have a hernia that is frustrating, but I am again attending my grandchildren's activities and swimming four times a week. I have gained weight (a little too much) and can dine on most foods, as long as they're not fried.

I look forward to my continued good health and traveling with my husband to visit my children, who are spread out across the country.

**I am a very lucky woman who discovered my pancreatic cancer by accident.**



**Christine** is a retired special education teacher who was diagnosed August 2019. She is the proud grandmother of 11, and her favorite thing is to spend time with her grandchildren and her husband of 49 years.

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and hard days — to make sense of the ways her medical treatment both saved and transformed her life with physical *and* psychological side effects. We explore ways to find meaning, revise goals and values, as well as identify ways of working through and processing that are specialized to her physical limitations from treatment and incredible emotional strengths.

When you start reaching out for mental health support, you might not know how or why it will help you.

As Eliza described, the timing, format, and delivery of mental health support does not always have to make sense from the beginning. A cancer diagnosis itself is enough to impact mental health with varied levels of adjustment to anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress, post-traumatic growth, and thoughts

about mortality, and overall changes in self-esteem, self-confidence, and daily behaviors. These vulnerabilities are valid and normal into survivorship. Addressing physical health is critical. But as research and my clinical experience shows, being able to live with your whole self — body and mind — is paramount.

Eliza and I both believe this to be true: There is no health without mental health.



# Lentil Soup

Lentil soup is always a great option if you're having difficulties swallowing. Fresh rosemary and shallots gives this version its rich, comforting flavor.



**Yield:** Serves 4

## Ingredients

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 2 tablespoons olive oil                     | 4 cups low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth                    |
| 2 shallots, minced                          | 2 to 3 sprigs fresh rosemary, washed well                       |
| 4 large carrots, washed, peeled, and sliced | 1 cup dry green or brown lentils, thoroughly rinsed and drained |
| 2 cloves garlic, minced                     | 2 cups chopped kale, very well washed and diced                 |
| ½ teaspoon salt                             |   |
| ½ teaspoon ground black pepper              |   |
| 2 sweet potatoes, washed, peeled, and diced |   |

## Instructions

1. Thoroughly rinse fresh produce under warm running water for 20 seconds. Scrub to remove excess dirt.
2. Heat a large pot over medium heat. Add olive oil, shallots, and carrots, and cook until carrots begin to soften, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and ¼ teaspoon each salt and pepper. Stir to combine, then cook until vegetables are tender, 4 to 5 minutes. Add sweet potatoes and remaining ¼ teaspoon each salt and pepper. Stir and cook an additional 2 minutes.
3. Add broth and rosemary, then increase heat to medium high. Bring to a rolling simmer. Add lentils and stir to combine. Reduce heat to low and simmer, uncovered, until lentils and potatoes are tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Add kale, stir, and cover. Cook an additional 3 to 4 minutes to soften. Taste and adjust flavor by adding salt and pepper as needed.
4. To serve, soup should register 145 degrees Fahrenheit or higher using an instant-read thermometer in the middle of the dish.

**Prep time:** 10 minutes

**Cook time:** 40 minutes

**Total time:** 50 minutes

Nutritional Information  
Calories - 330 calories  
Carbohydrates - 53g  
Fat - 9g  
Fiber - 12g  
Protein - 14g  
Saturated Fat - 1g  
Sodium - 580mg  
Sugar - 12g

Recipes for People with Cancer:

<https://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/nutrition-cancer/recipes>

**Scan the QR code** to be directed to the *Bridges* website and find this issue online.



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## Visible Ink

### A One-on-One Writing Program for MSK patients

Interested patients will work individually with the guidance, encouragement, and support of a professional writer on a topic and project of their choice. This program is FREE. All levels and writing interests welcome.

For more information or to arrange a writing session, please contact Judith Kelman at 212-535-3985 or [kelmanj@mskcc.org](mailto:kelmanj@mskcc.org).

## Patient Support Program Rising Voices

### "Something to Sing About"

Rising Voices is a lively singing group open to MSK patients, caregivers, and survivors. Available at our Manhattan and Westchester locations, Rising Voices is a free and supportive program sponsored by Integrative Medicine and Volunteer Resources.

To join, please call 646-888-0800.

**Interested in sharing your story or receiving an email copy?**

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[www.mskcc.org/bridges](http://www.mskcc.org/bridges)



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