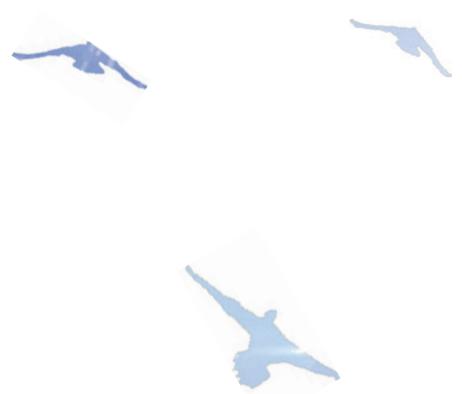




# An Evening of Memories



## Cancer program staff and families celebrate the lives of patients

Outpatient cancer center staff can become a second family to many patients and their caregivers. From the valet parking attendant to the receptionist at the front desk, registrars, nursing station clerks, clinical assistants, patient advocates, nurse navigators, and the oncology nurses—each team member shares a part in the patients’ cancer journey. Oncology nurses, many of whom have been working in the field for more than 20 years, often form a special bond with patients and families. Treating the same patient daily, or weekly, for months or even years, nurses and patients build relationships and genuinely care about each other.

### In the Beginning

In 2010, a nurse at Stony Brook Cancer Center, Stony Brook, N.Y., told colleagues that she was having a difficult time dealing with the recent death of a long-term patient. The patient had passed away peacefully in home hospice, but the nurse did not have the opportunity to offer her condolences to the family members nor did she have a setting to grieve for the patient. Often the staff only finds out about a passing when the patient no longer comes for chemotherapy, and it is rare that the family returns to the cancer center.

This story was the impetus that led Stony Brook’s Department of Patient Advocacy and Community Outreach to approach cancer center administrators with the idea of hosting an event to celebrate the lives of patients who had recently passed. It was believed that such an event would offer a chance for staff and family members to come together in a celebratory, but dignified, manner.

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### Creating Our Evening of Memories

With the full support of administration, staff created an appropriate title and tagline for this event: “*An Evening of Memories. Remembering those we love who have passed from this life.*” Patient Advocacy and Community Outreach staff were careful not to use specific religious connotations, but still acknowledge the power of spirituality and prayer for those who take comfort in their beliefs. Next, the event needed a visual representation of its mission. The artist daughter of a Stony Brook staff member designed a simple cancer ribbon with wings and a halo, and this logo is used every year.

As a group, staff brainstormed the invitation wording to invite family members to this event. This simple statement said it all, “*Please join us to honor the memory of those who have touched our lives.*” The reverse side of the invitational flyer, which was sent to the families of patients who had died within the past year, explained the program in more detail.



We hoped not only to receive responses about attendance, but also to have family members submit photos of and write a few words about their loved one. We asked anyone who wanted to speak about their relative or friend to prepare a few words. Our first batch of invitations received more than 30 responses with 10 photos and/or reflections about the life of the loved one.

### Program Nuts & Bolts

For those cancer programs looking to implement a similar program, the steps are simple.

- Identify the patients who have passed in the last year to develop your invitation list.
- Collect the necessary contact information.
- Design, print, and label your invitations in sealed envelopes to respect privacy.
- Address the invitations to “The Family of (Name of the Deceased).”
- Allow enough time for the RSVP and for family members to send a photograph and/or story. (Some older family members will send a hard copy photo in the mail.)
- If your program can afford to provide journals with photos and patient stories, the families appreciate this keepsake. (We print a limited supply in-house.) We also provide attendees with a tote bag and a blank notebook featuring our cancer program name and logo.
- Design your program and invite your speakers and musicians. Our volunteer pool is generally comprised of students from the music department at a local college and band members from local high schools. We typically have the following speakers: an administrator, an oncology nurse, a social worker, a chaplain, and any family members who wish to talk about their loved ones.
- Arrange for light refreshments. We provide a tray of cookies and bottled water from catering in our hospital dietary department.
- Set up a podium, microphone, and digital projector and screen to show a continuous loop of the photos submitted. We also include information on healing projects that we offer at the cancer center. The photo montage with background music sets the tone of the program and gives guests something to watch while they arrive. We place boxes of tissues every few seats. Battery-powered candles are on each seat for the moment of silence.

The program begins with a welcome by our nursing director, followed by a moment of silence. Then a volunteer staff member (or the chaplain) reads the names of those who have died. After, our chaplain offers a reflection and opens the floor up to reflections and/or remarks from family members. Next, an oncology nurse talks briefly on what it means to care for patients, and

the evening is brought to a conclusion with a positive and empowering message from one of our social workers.

The entire event, including invitations, music, and refreshments, costs less than \$500. While *An Evening of Memories* is one of our more inexpensive patient initiatives, it is also one of the most cathartic for staff, family members, and caregivers. It cements the bond between staff and families, providing an outlet to honor the loved one who has passed and creating cherished memories and a bit of closure for all involved.

Over the years, we have refined the program based on feedback from staff and family members. Sometimes we arrange for a singer to perform “Amazing Grace,” a guitarist or violinist to play, or simply use an iPod with soothing background music. Social workers, nurses, navigators, and chaplains are available to talk and reminisce after the service.

The first time we hosted *An Evening of Memories*, we were unsure how many family members would want to share personal remarks. The first year of this program, only one family member volunteered. However, after she spoke, two additional families wanted to pay tribute to their loved one. We learned quickly that first year to have many boxes of tissues available, for both family members and for staff.

The most amazing part of *An Evening of Memories* is how the program has grown and how family members return year after year to share with new families of the recently deceased. The second year, a gentleman asked to speak about his beloved wife of more than 30 years. He said that he had attended the previous year at the behest of his daughter, but all he could do was numbly sit through the program. This year, he wanted to share with those who had just lost someone that it does get better. The pain never goes away, but the intensity of the grief lessens.

We also hear from our nurses how deeply they care for their patients. One nurse said it best: “*It is our honor and privilege to care for your loved ones.*”

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