

views

A Smile Can Make a Difference!



Oncology Issues recently spoke with the resource coordinator for the San Juan Cancer Center at Montrose Memorial Hospital in Montrose, Colo., Francie Smiles. As part of a rural cancer center, Ms. Smiles strives to go above and beyond for cancer patients in this unique role. She runs the Caring Friends Fund for the cancer center and has a vital role in community fundraising.

Q. *What is your typical day like?*

F.S. My job description is simple: “Find out what patients need and get it for them.” From day to day my job isn’t the same. When I first come in, I go directly to the cancer center and get a list of all of our patients who are in the hospital. I visit patients and sit with families and ask about their needs. Sometimes patients are pretty unhappy, but mostly they’re just grateful to have someone reach out to them.

Unfortunately I do attend far too many funerals. But being able to represent the cancer center where these patients and their families have spent their last days, you realize what a difference you can make. I’ve had the privilege and the honor of being with more than one family in the intensive care where a patient’s journey is going to end. I don’t think many other cancer centers have a staff member that does exactly what I do.

Q. *How did you come to take this position?*

F.S. About 16 years ago I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I wish I could say that I was the person who participated in awareness events and helped raise money for

worthy causes prior to my cancer diagnosis, but I wasn’t. But after my diagnosis, I became very proactive with a breast cancer support group called Bosom Buddies of Southwestern Colorado. My mother was also diagnosed with cancer. Sadly, her battle ended far too early. My mother received all of her treatment in Grand Junction—a 120 mile round trip on a two-lane road.

Q. *As a survivor, does that help you relate to these patients?*

F.S. It was life-changing for me, so I can absolutely relate to these patients and families. Sometimes when someone is told they have cancer, it’s a relief to see a non-medical staff member who isn’t going to go into the complex details of the treatment process. I can be the person who simply says: “I know your cancer diagnosis is a bummer. I know that spending hours sitting in this infusion chair is a bummer.” I can just spend time with patients and families talking and offering hands-on support.

Q. *Is there an application process for the Caring Friends Fund?*

F.S. We don’t have a formal application process. The nurses and staff listen to our patients and come to me when they find out that a patient or family has specific needs that are not being met. But we do have a \$500 limit per patient, per occurrence.

Q. *What form of aid is given to patients?*

F.S. We pass out a lot of debit cards and we also help with co-pays. Sometimes our fund

is able to pay for other items like medication, motel rooms, or food. We make sure patients are eating, that they can get to their appointments, and that they can get home. For example, we don’t have a PET scanner in Montrose, so patients have to go to Grand Junction and the trip is 60 miles one way. I’ve actually picked up patients and taken them to their treatment appointment. It’s the last recourse, but sometimes it’s the only option available.

Q. *How do you raise money for the Caring Friends Fund?*

F.S. All proceeds come from our generous community. We hold one event called the “Grin and Barrett Bike Ride,” which was started in 2005 by a man who was treated at our cancer center for colon cancer. It has grown to be a very large bike ride here in Montrose County, and we’ve been able to help close to 100 patients a year with non-medical needs. Another fundraiser is called “Building the Caring Friends Fund One Brick at a Time.” We sell small colored bricks, representing 12 types of cancer for \$50 each. We started the drive three months ago and have already raised \$1,500.

Q. *What advice would you give to other resource coordinators?*

F.S. Practice the art of listening. It’s amazing what you will hear when you actually listen. People will open up and share. Aside from listening, just care. People who have cancer are scared. But with you by their side, they’re not alone on their journey. 