

COURAGE, LIFE & HOPE

# REFLECTIONS *of a journey*



**ASPIRUS™**  
REGIONAL  
CANCER CENTER

Passion for excellence. Compassion for people.



## Ilah Henze

Ilah Henze had 12 years of nursing experience in various departments at Wausau Hospital, caring for obstetric, surgical and heart patients, among others. When the opportunity came along to work with cancer patients, though, she hesitated.

“I thought, ‘that must be an awful place to work,’” Ilah said. “But I tried it and I fell in love with it.”

For a decade, she got to know the wonderful, unique stories her patients had to tell. From a caregiver’s perspective she witnessed the pain, love and spirit that characterize so many people struggling with cancer. Then, in October 2002, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and suddenly learned what cancer was like from the patient’s point of view.

“When patients talk about numbness in the fingers or toes, or about having an awful taste in their mouth, or that food doesn’t appeal to them, you really understand what they’re talking about,” she said. The insider’s view helped her to be a better nurse – even though she didn’t share her own story with patients unless she thought it would help.

But there was a downside to working in the Cancer Center through her six cycles of chemotherapy: She received constant reminders that the disease is unpredictable. Despite the fact that people with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma have a 50 percent to 70 percent survival rate, every patient and every tumor responds differently to treatment.

“You see some doing well, and you think ‘this is going to be me,’” Ilah said. “Then you see others, and you realize that cancer has a mind of its own and statistics don’t mean anything.”

Confronted with this uncertainty, Ilah drew strength from her faith. Also, a tight group of professional and informal caregivers materialized around her, and she said the support from family, friends, colleagues and patients was a tremendous blessing:

- Members of the After Reach breast cancer support group became her pillars.
- Her sister, diagnosed with lung cancer two years ago, became her confidante.
- When she lost her hair, a family friend who hadn’t shaved his beard in 25 years buzzed it off and her husband – who didn’t have much left to lose – shaved his head.

- She maintained closer contact with her daughter, a 17-year member of the navy, and son.
- Coworkers constantly encouraged her, and even badgered her when she didn’t get up at 5 a.m. to exercise.

Ilah tolerated treatment very well. With the exception of taking off four days during the first cycle of chemo,

she worked through the shots and pills. But she has been changed by the cancer; she has gained perspective.

“I always thought I wanted to die suddenly, but I’ve changed my mind,” she said. “Even if you die of the disease, you’ve had time to tell people how important they are to you. You’ve been able to read the cards and say the things that need to be said.”

And there are many, many cancer patients who live long lives after diagnosis, and get to enjoy life in a new way. That’s important to remember.

“We tend to think about the people who have died of cancer, instead of all those who are living with it,” she said.

