Uncommon Bonds

*Cancer Nurses Impact Patients’ Lives in Many Ways*

Kristie Coles, RN, BSN, OCN, didn’t envision building her career in oncology. Quite the opposite, in fact. Coming out of nursing school, Coles was certain that oncology was where she didn’t want to go.

But oncology turned out to be her first offer. She accepted, believing that the position would be a stepping-stone for her next assignment. It took only six months as a cancer nurse to change her mind. Since then, Coles has built a 17-year career in cancer care—a career that has stamped her patients’ lives as well as her own.

As an outpatient nurse and care coordinator, there isn’t another shift that comes to take over for Coles. Connections with her patients are ongoing over spans of weeks, months, years.

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Bench to Bedside

Partnership between UVA & survivors speeds research

Cancer researchers don’t always get to meet the patients and families who benefit from their work. For Dr. Christopher Moskaluk, chair of the Department of Pathology, a side project led him to become a part of the lives of cancer patients across the country.

When Moskaluk came to UVA 16 years ago, he planned to study the pathology of common cancer tumors. “Then, one day, Dr. Henry Frierson suggested that I look at this interesting tumor, and I started working with him.”

The tumor, in fact, was from a patient with adenoid cystic carcinoma (ACC), a rare form of cancer that most often develops in the salivary glands. A very slow progressing disease, ACC is unrelenting and often metastasizes to the lungs and liver. There is no effective drug treatment for the disease, and patients frequently have to endure several challenging surgeries as their cancer progresses.

Moskaluk and Frierson were able to identify genetic abnormalities that may be the underlying cause of ACC. The team published their findings in a national journal.

“Suddenly there were people coming out of the woodwork,” Moskaluk remembers, “patients who were excited to see research being done in this field.”

Since then, UVA has become one of the few cancer centers to study ACC, and Moskaluk has traveled across the country to help raise awareness about the disease.

“I’ve gotten to know these people and become a part of their lives. It’s a real and personal connection that researchers don’t always get to form.”

Private support from these individuals funded additional research on ACC, which in turn, helped UVA open a clinical trial that uses an already available experimental drug that may be able to slow, stop, or even shrink tumors. UVA oncologist Dr. Patrick Dillon is overseeing the clinical trial. While results are preliminary, the drug shows great promise.

“ACC impacts so few people that it does not receive the same level of awareness or funding as more common cancers,” Moskaluk explains. “Without the support of groups like Attack ACC and the ACC Research Foundation, we would not be where we are today.”

Now UVA is planning a second clinical trial, looking for more targets that could switch off tumor growth. This remarkable “bench to bedside” story that has given new hope to those with ACC would not have happened without the generosity of private donors, coupled with the passion of researchers and physicians at UVA.

Raising Awareness and Hope

More than 20,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year, and approximately 15,000 women die annually from the disease. Unfortunately, most cases are diagnosed in later stages when the prognosis is poor. To help raise awareness about the disease, the Barb Winegord Ovarian Cancer Awareness Golf Tournament is held each year at Massanutten. This past September, Winegord presented UVA physician Dr. Linda Duska with a $10,000 check to speed ovarian cancer research at UVA. Thanks to everyone who helped make the tournament another great success!
Lee Mullen is no stranger to the Charlottesville Women’s Four Miler.
The local businesswoman, and long-time supporter of UVA Children’s Hospital, had run the race for 10 years. Her company, Allied Portable Toilets, helped sponsor the race for the last five.

In 2011, however, everything changed. Ten days before her daughter’s wedding, Mullen was diagnosed with breast cancer.

She turned to the UVA Breast Care Center for help. There she was given a Navigational Notebook, which helped guide her through her treatments. The notebook came in a Four Miler tote bag, stuffed with exercise videos, recipes, and information on how to choose a wig.

The fact that these resources are made possible through the Four Miler wasn’t lost on Mullen. “That bag was a great help,” she remembers.

“Collectively, the funds we raise for the Four Miler do so much,” she says. “Not only are we providing funds for groundbreaking breast cancer research, we are providing for education programs and support services for newly diagnosed patients…like myself.”

After two surgeries, along with chemo and radiation treatments, Mullen is now cancer free.

“No one at UVA gave up on me,” Mullen says. “It was UVA’s state-of-the-art technology combined with a dedicated team of specialists that were the key to my success. On my daughter’s wedding day, my tears were all about the joy of life and love and knowing I was going to be around to celebrate for many years to come.”

What’s more, Mullen also participated in a vaccine clinical trial at UVA, so that she “might help others, women like my two daughters and three sisters who might face the same diagnosis one day.”

For Mullen, the 2012 race was especially sweet—she was chosen to officially start the race. Now she’s looking forward to the next phase of her life.

“Next year I’ll just be a survivor. Breast cancer won’t be my recent history,” she says. “It will be history.”

From Sponsor to Survivor
The Four Miler Touches Close to Home

30th Anniversary of the Charlottesville Women’s Four Miler Sets Historic Record

It may have been a rainy day, but that didn’t dampen the enthusiasm of the 2,900 women who crossed the finish line at the Charlottesville Women’s Four Miler on September 1, 2012. Thanks to these women—and the generosity of families, friends, volunteers, and community sponsors—the race raised a record $340,000 to support the Breast Care Program and breast cancer research at UVA through the Patients & Friends Research Fund. Congratulations to everyone who helped make this historic event a remarkable achievement.
in those relationships as much as it is in the science of cancer care. Somewhere between answering questions, wiping tears, and giving hugs, her work leaves an imprint.

She remembers a voicemail message that came through one Friday afternoon, just before she was set to go home for the day. One of her patients had passed away.

But the message was not defined by grief.

“It was a lovely message thanking me for being there, thanking me for being a resource,” Coles recalls, still moved by the memory. “I sat there for a moment after listening to the message and I could feel tears in my eyes.”

In their time of loss, her patient’s family reached out to express gratitude—a testimony to the lasting impact oncology nurses make with each relationship they build.

A New Way to Deliver Care
Inside the Emily Couric Clinical Cancer Center, 24 nurse coordinators—including Kristie Coles—help plan, coordinate, and oversee care for patients and their families.


Want to honor a nurse? Visit campaign.virginia.edu/cancercenterbrick.

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CONTINUED FROM COVER

“Nurses fill a void that patients might not even know exists,” explains Couric Center Clinical Manager Daryll Ann Heisler, RN, BSN. “From education about medications, to psychological counsel, or help with travel and logistics, cancer nurses put patients at the center of care. Everything we do in the Couric Center is designed to pivot around the patients. Our nurses manage that process.”

It’s a challenging role. Many cancer patients come to UVA from two to three hours away. Managing multiple appointments, and making sure that all patients and their families get the care and support they need, requires dedication and first-hand knowledge of the person and their circumstances. That connection leaves a mark, not only on the patient, but on the nurse as well.

“It has been a life-altering experience for me to get to be a part of what the men and women I care for are going through,” Coles says. “My job has helped me gain perspective in my life. Things that maybe seemed like they were big problems are actually small in comparison to what my patients have to go through on a daily basis.”