

Glorieta Cancer Retreat – A Road Back to “Normal”

Menolda Bakker, Los Alamos Council on Cancer Board Member, will be volunteering at the Cancer Services of New Mexico Cancer Retreat this April. In doing so, she will be helping others, through her own experience, and spreading the word about the LACC and how it can help Los Alamos residents. Organized by the Cancer Services of NM, the goal of the retreat is to provide patients and their loved ones with the tools and information needed to deal with the day to day challenges of living with cancer. Bakker was diagnosed with cancer in 2005 and she found her experience at the retreat a lifesaver.

As Bakker remembers early on in her cancer diagnosis, “I felt like I was running a race to keep ahead of everything that was happening to me, and at the same time having to make decisions about things I'd never thought about for a second. I just knew one thing: I was not going to let cancer kill me”. Having only been married for a year, Bakker and her husband Skip, had so many great ideas about how they planned to live their lives together, forever! With the help of her husband, family, and friends, Bakker decided she was going to do everything she could to make that happen.

Cancer patients often deal with the emotional struggle of cancer through their dreams. In a dream Bakker had recently, she had to write a test, getting frustrated because she did not understand what she was supposed to do. She did not even know what questions were being asked. While everyone else around her seemed to understand, for Bakker, it was just a mass of unrelated information being thrown her way. Talking with her husband about it, she realized that the dream was actually mirroring how she felt when she was diagnosed with cancer. Bakker says, “while all these wonderful doctors, nurses and specialists do their very best to explain what needs to be done to save your life, you keep feeling as if they are talking about someone else. At the same time, you don't understand what any of it means”. For Bakker, it was like that mass of information being thrown at her and, just like in her bad dream, she couldn't understand. “When this is over, everything is going to be back to the old normal” she thought. Unfortunately, as with many other cancer patients, Bakker did not realize that a whole new set of problems was yet to come. “As you reach the end of the treatment, you have to find your way back into your “normal” life”. That's when a whole new set of questions arise. Just what is normal? And that's what the Glorieta Retreat helped Bakker answer.

Realizing that this is a very different normal to before, is one of the hardest things to accept. In reality, nothing is like it was before. You start questioning all those things that seemed to be so natural before your disease. For most people, its very normal to go on a nice vacation. For Bakker and her husband, it was difficult to even do a small trip. Glorieta was the first test to see if they could go away for a weekend. It turned out to be a good choice. Soon they felt at ease and as the days flew by they were getting a lot closer to being able to formulate the questions that they were struggling to ask. “Looking back, I feel like we were turned in the right direction”. The roads to those answers will surely be different for each individual and that, in itself, is one of the great reasons for

having an important initiative like the Glorieta Retreat: a place where people, who are dealing with the day to day challenges of their “new normal”, can get together for serious discussion, lots of fun and a special celebration of life. Doesn't that sound like the most normal thing to do?

Since her first visit as a patient in 2005, Bakker and her husband have been volunteers at the retreat several times. “Every time we come home, we feel more aware of where we are on this exciting road of life and our thankfulness for being alive.”

For more information about the Glorieta Retreat go to: www.CancerServicesNM.org or click on the link on the LACC website: www.losalamoscounciloncancer.org. You can also call Menolda Bakker at 672-9030 for more about her experience and the benefits of attending.