



**Cancer Family Network of Montana is proud and honored to present the April 2008 Cancer Connections Forum:**

***"If we would just DO what we know works..."* by Rita McDonald, Survivor/Advocate, and Recipient of the Montana Cancer Control Coalition 2007 Bette Bohlinger Leadership Award.**

Yes, if we would only do what we know works. That seems pretty simple doesn't it? Greetings to all of you. I am Rita McDonald, and I am a stage 3 colon cancer survivor. To those of you who don't understand what that means, I had about a 20% chance of surviving my cancer. Those aren't really very good odds. What I would like to attempt to do through out this forum is communicate my story to you and share with you some of the things I have learned since my original diagnosis. I would also like to discuss spirituality as it relates to recovery. And, maybe all of you can help me figure out how to get people to care enough about themselves to really take prevention seriously. Where do we place the responsibility for our health?

Let me be clear to you, I have been very diligent about my yearly check ups for many years. I read a lot, watch informative programs on television and consider myself pretty well informed about my health. When I began to have symptoms like bloating, stomach cramps after a meal, and blood in my stool, I had myself convinced it was a bleeding ulcer. Though I knew little to nothing about stomach ulcers, it turns out I knew even less about colon cancer.

When the worry and pain became too much for me to deal with, I made an appointment with my doctor who immediately set me up for a colonoscopy. When the colonoscopy was over, the doctor came in to talk to my husband and me. He told us he had indeed found something very disturbing; I had a "growth" in my colon. My response was, "Well, can't you just take it out"? He then told me that he had taken a biopsy and it would be evaluated for cancer cells but that he was quite sure it was colon cancer.

That evening, after we were told I most probably had colon cancer, we returned to the ranch. We were greeted by our daughter, granddaughter and a couple of close friends. My daughter, Karla said to me, "Mom, what do you want to tell people Do you want me to tell them what is wrong with you"? Without hesitation my answer was "YES!! Tell everyone because I need their help if I am going to get through this." That was the first thing I knew for sure!

After the shock of hearing the "C" work, I had to find out what the colon was and I discovered it was my large intestine. Of course, I had always heard of both, just didn't ever know they were one and the same! Many years ago, when I was a very young mother, I became ill and the doctor told me I had colitis. I really never knew what that meant other than I had terrible symptoms and pain. Apparently nothing happened over the next 40 years to teach me about my colon/large intestine or colorectal cancer.

In less than a week after the colonoscopy I underwent surgery for colorectal cancer. When I woke up after the surgery my surgeon told us that he had taken about 14 inches of my colon and six lymph nodes. He explained they had taken part of my rectum as well. He also told me that I had a colostomy, a bag attached to my stomach in which to collect my bowel movements. It was all so new to me as I knew nothing of such a thing. This was a huge obstacle for me to overcome. When I shared these sentiments with my doctor, his response was, "You are a country girl, it won't take you long to get used to it"! Did I get "used to it"? Well, with Art's help and loving support I did learn to deal with it, get used to it, NO. It was one of the most difficult parts of my experience. My solemn vow, as I lay in the hospital after surgery

was that I would **TELL EVERYONE MY STORY SO THEY WOULDN'T HAVE TO GO THROUGH WHAT I WAS GOING THROUGH.** By then I knew that if I had known to be screened for colon cancer at age 50 I wouldn't be lying there in that hospital bed with a 20% change of survival. I knew colon cancer was very treatable with Early Detection. **I HAD TO TELL EVERYONE!!**

I am fortunate to be part of a large family. I have 5 siblings, 19 nieces and nephews, many “greats and grand’s”. We also have 3 children, an adopted daughter, 3 blood grandchildren and quite a few “other” grandchildren. Fortunately I have acquired a wonderful bunch of “in-laws” as well as some dear friends, whom I also consider part of my family, over the years. The word of my surgery and the dangerous situation I was in seemed to spread quickly. The prayers and expressions of care and concern came pouring in. Our son brought our grandchildren Alex and Rosie to see me a couple of weeks after my surgery. Their fear and concern was so apparent. I thought I was looking and feeling pretty good, however, the look on their little faces told me the real truth. When I realized how worried they were, I put my arms around them and assured them I was going to “get well” and they shouldn’t be so worried. I found my reassurance was good for me as well as them. It was good for me to say it out loud, **“I am going to get well!”**

My husband, Art, was there with me always. One day though while he was out of the room, I was lying there, hurting, scared, worried about the future, and so alone. Suddenly as my eyes were closed I began to feel a sense of something entering my body. It is difficult to explain. It would start as a very bright light coming toward me. Then at some point, it would dissipate. As I lay there wondering what had just happened I began to realize I felt different. I would feel a sense of energy I hadn’t felt before, less agitated, and more hopeful about my predicament. This continued to happen on a daily basis. It wasn’t long before I realized that something very positive was happening to me. One of our nieces, Kathy, had a son who was a professional baseball player. One day Kathy called and told me that she had phoned her son and told him about me. At that time he was a member of the New York Yankees baseball team. Some of his friends and he had a group who met on a regular basis and he told Kathy that he would put me on their prayer chain. One of these “happenings” happened that very same day. Another happened after one of my sister-in-laws put me on a pray chain at their church, and so on and so on. I didn’t tell anyone about these “happenings” for a very long time. I was well into my recovery before I came to realize that these were indeed spiritual experiences. My Creator was allowing the prayers to help me through this terrible ordeal!

At the time of my diagnosis I was in the best physical shape I had been in, maybe ever. Though I was 61 years old, I had honored my commitment to “get healthy”. I lost around 90 pounds and was on a 2 to 3 mile a day walking program. Winter or summer, it didn’t matter, I was out there! Two weeks after my surgery I was walking a half a mile. When I told my surgeon, he was pretty surprised. However, after the chemotherapy started, I didn’t always have the time or energy to walk. Plus, we drove a 200 mile round trip every day for the treatments. The road trips alone were very tiring. Our granddaughter, Aleena, who was 4 at the time, made nearly every trip with us. The nurses and doctors came to know her well and even let her “help” with some of the things they needed to do for me. She would sit on the arm of the chair, with her arm around me holding my hand, feeding us both ice chips through the chemo treatments! She turned out to be a

very active and important part of my recovery. Sometimes dragging me on walks and out to see the springtime when I didn't really feel like it.

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I think I am a day behind, we had trouble getting this sent from my work computer, I am sorry for the mix up!

We live on a ranch and raise Quarter Horses. It was spring, the most exciting time of the year here at the ranch, baby colts start being born! I tried very hard to continue my role in the process of foaling out the mares and the rebreeding them. The anticipation of the new babies and motherly concern for the mares was a constant source of support in that it made me feel needed. This rural lifestyle is and has always been part of who I am. It was important for me to be able to continue to fill this role.

Art took the year off from work to take care of me. There were months of chemotherapy, and radiation. At one point there was a combination of chemo 24/7 and radiation for 6 weeks. We even had to go on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July! We were offered an option of staying in Billings during the treatments but home is where I needed to be. It was my safe place and where I felt comfortable. It was also a way to stay connected to my family. Our daughter, Karla, and family live on the ranch. Those of you reading this and having gone through a similar experience I'm sure will agree that watching family and friends try to cope with our cancer is very difficult. Some have shared with me the fear and feelings of helplessness they felt. While we, the patients, are doing everything we can and need to do to recover. Little do they know if not for their love, support and prayers, we might not recover!!

I was told to eat calories to help my body recover and deal with the treatments. My resident "cook" prepared many of the meals throughout those months. My Oncologist kept reminding me that other than the cancer, I was in good physical health. He knew how important that would be to my eventual recovery. He told me that they were going to "hit this hard" so as to maximize my chances of having the cancer not return in my colon or somewhere else. Of course, as time went on, I soon realized what he meant by "hit it hard".

At around 10 months after my original surgery, they did another surgery to reverse the colostomy. Though I was very happy to be rid of "the bag", the transition was very difficult. There was diarrhea to deal with on a daily basis for many months. After the radiation treatments I was told I could possibly develop adhesions from the radial therapy or from trauma to the intestines because of the invasiveness of the surgeries. About 2 years after the last surgery I did begin to have problems. These episodes were described to me as partial bowel blockages. Many times I was hospitalized and was treated for dehydration and pain. Four years after the original surgery I had to have yet another surgery to remove a part of my small intestine that was causing the blockages. Today, six plus years after surgery I still deal with the blockages and it is a constant management problem for me. There are many things I can't eat, seeds, roughage, popcorn, nuts, fresh fruits and vegetables. I have to be very careful with my fiber intake. It will

be something I will have to manage for the rest of my life as there are no “fixes” for this problem.

When Art returned to work he took a position at the Ashland Community Health Center in Ashland MT. I was in recovery mode, staying home and tending our granddaughter, Aleena when she needed care. One day the director of the Ashland Community Health Center called me to ask me if I would be interested in attending a meeting in Helena. It seemed that Montana along with many other states had been mandated the task of developing a state cancer control plan. There was an organizational meeting planned and they needed people in attendance who could become stakeholders in a cancer control plan. I was happy to attend and quickly became involved in this exciting movement. I found that my experiences as a survivor could provide valuable insight into Early Detection and Prevention. We came up with a name for the group, **Montana Cancer Control Coalition**. Our MTCCC consisted of around 160 volunteers from across the state. Within 2 years we had a 5 year cancer control plan in place. We are now in our second year of implementation. It has been very rewarding to be in on this cancer control plan since its inception. Everyone in the coalition is committed to lowering the incidence of cancer in our state. If anyone is interested in becoming a member, please contact me and I will tell you how to do that. We are always happy to welcome new members.

In the spring of 2007 the MTCCC members awarded me the Bette Bohlinger Leadership award at our meeting in Missoula. This award had been established by the MTCCC to honor people who had shown leadership in the battle to control cancer. Being given this award was an incredible honor. Bette Bohlinger was such an outstanding person who showed such strength and bravery in the face of her battle with leukemia. Bette, along with her husband, Lt. Governor John Bohlinger had been very supportive of our coalition efforts. Bette lost her battle with leukemia in early 2005. Lt. Governor Bohlinger has continued to lend his support to our group.

At this point it is necessary for me to describe the feelings I had upon receiving this award because I feel it has been a constant reminder of my victory, which is survival. One of the feelings I had was that the award had validated my struggle to become a survivor. I had done it! And here I was, in a position to encourage others to keep up the fight. My “story” was now televised statewide and an article about my journey was published in newspapers across the country! Can you imagine how wonderful it felt, to be called a Cancer Crusader? To come to the realization that if I could tell my story to the people I loved and cared about and give others the knowledge they needed to **NEVER HAVE TO GO THROUGH WHAT I HAD BEEN THROUGH** that I could possibly save someone’s life? Can you imagine how exciting that was? Grateful? Oh yes, grateful beyond words, to so many people. First of all, to all of my medical providers for their excellent knowledge and care without which, I most surely would not have survived! To my family and friends who surrounded me with prayers, letters, cards, beautiful flowers, visits, phone calls and supported me in every other way you can imagine. At times they lifted me up and carried me on their wings so that there was no place for me to fall. How could I miss? How could I give up? Exactly when would that have been possible? Oh, don’t get me wrong, there certainly were dark days and nights, but “the light” would come again and give me

strength. The mail would come and there would be more encouragement. I put all of my letters and cards up on the wall in my dining area where I could see them and draw strength from them every day. It was over a year before I took them all down. I still have them.

Six years have passed since my colorectal cancer diagnosis and surgery. I am still telling my story. About a year ago I went to work half time at the Ashland Community Health Center, Ashland MT to develop a cancer prevention and outreach plan that would work in rural/frontier communities. In these communities, there are very few if any, professional health care providers. Therein clearly lays the need to educate people so that they can become responsible for their own preventative care. They need to be given the knowledge to prepare an action plan for their preventative Cancer Control. People need to know about screenings for colorectal, breast, cervical, prostate and the other cancers. We need to prepare them for providers that for whatever reason aren't able to diagnosis certain cancers. We need to teach them to recognize any symptoms they may be having so they can seek medical advice when they first suspect something is wrong. We need to help them find their voices so they know what to do when providers aren't referring patients to Specialists until it's too late. How are they going to take the necessary steps to become responsible for their own cancer control? We need to educate our friends in the small frontier communities, give them the tools they need to fight this deadly disease. **WE CAN MAKE A HUGE IMPACT ON CANCER CONTROL IF WE WOULD ONLY DO WHAT WE KNOW WORKS!** Prevention AND Early Detection! We know that these things work and can save lives. We can make it work if we will just do it!

Prevention is the key to controlling certain kinds of cancer. If you aren't at a healthy weight, do the work to get there. Eat more fruits, vegetables and fiber, lower your fat intake, and limit consumption of red meat. Eat some fish, every week. Eat more chicken and turkey. Watch your portions. The Elders used to tell their people that a meal was what they could hold in their hand! One hand! You don't have to feel deprived if you just limit your intake of things that are not on the healthy list. Maybe you could look forward to a piece of cake on the weekend. Also, pay attention to your family histories. Some cancers are more prevalent in families and you need to know if you are at risk of developing a hereditary cancer.

Exercise is so important. **GET A MOVE ON!** You can make it happen. Just start out slowly and before you know it you will be walking a mile, riding your stationary bicycle 20 minutes. If you have the option to work out at the gym, go do it! Do whatever it takes to take control of your own cancer prevention. Some communities have walking clubs. If yours doesn't, you and your friends could start one. Exercising with friends is a great thing. We are all in it together, supporting each other!

In conclusion, it was my intention during the forum to demonstrate to all of you the things that I feel were paramount to my becoming a survivor. Throughout my presentation hopefully you recognize how spirituality plays an important role in recovery. Prayers are heard! Those of you who are also survivors will know what I am talking about when I say that I couldn't have fought this battle alone. I needed to draw on the love, support, and strengths of my family and friends.

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Those of you, who have the opportunity to provide these things to a loved one, please know how important it is to do so! Please don't worry about knowing the "right thing to say". Your words are no where near as important as your presence in the cancer patients lives. Lend a hand when they need something. Don't wait for them to ask, they may not. Be empathetic, just listening to them can be so healing. Check in with them with a quick phone call. Let them know you are praying for them and how important they are to you. Make them a batch of cookies! They will appreciate it so much.

**REMIND EVERYONE YOU KNOW TO GET THEIR SCREENINGS FOR CANCER!** If we do this, we will surely make a difference and be doing **WHAT WE KNOW WORKS!** Thank you for listening and please don't hesitate to email me your questions.