

Healing music

Violinist helps friend and others live with cancer, chemotherapy

By Patti Levine-Brown
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As a violinist with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra for the past 10 years, Andy Bruck has played before thousands of people, but some of his most rewarding performances have been solos performed in front of only a few people: cancer patients at the Baptist Cancer Institute.

One of those patients is Bruck's friend, Tina Cross, who was diagnosed with breast cancer last August. The two met seven years ago through Soka Gakkai International, Jacksonville's Buddhist lay organization.

In November of last year, Bruck asked to play for Cross while she underwent her chemotherapy treatments, which can last as long as seven hours. Officials at the institute agreed, and because the treatments are in an open area, others have had the opportunity to listen to Bruck play.

"Everyone seems to enjoy listening to Andy play," said Ardea Oliver, a volunteer with Baptist Medical Center's Auxiliary. "It says a lot about a person who would come and do this for people who are ill."

Bruck said he has read about the positive effects music seems to have on people who are sick, and over the years he has gone to the homes of other friends with serious illnesses and played his music. He has also played for patients as part of a program called Body and Soul, which brings music to staff and patients at Baptist Medical Center. He said he was concerned early on as to how playing music for Cross at the Cancer Institute might be received by other patients, but he said it was important to him to do what he could to help with her recovery.

"At first I was concerned that my playing would disturb others or that I would be too loud and someone would ask me not to play, but the response has been very encouraging," Bruck said.

Sitting in a recliner, covered with a quilt made for her by some of her co-workers, Cross receives her chemotherapy intravenously. She listens intently as Bruck begins to play. Her facial expressions relax, and she begins to laugh with friends who have come to sit with her and some of the other patients.



Andy Bruck plays while his friend Tina Cross (center) receives chemotherapy treatment at Baptist Cancer Institute. On each side of Cross are her friends and co-workers, LaDonna Morris (left) and Harriet Courtney. Also enjoying the music while receiving chemotherapy is Annie Thompkins.

-- Bob Mack/Staff



Bruck has been playing his violin while Cross gets the treatment in hopes of making the treatment easier on her and others in the Institute.

-- Bob Mack/Staff

"Andy is so sincere in his efforts to do something that will help make me well again," Cross said. "He also tries to help me eat correctly by cooking for me. Whatever I need, Andy is there for me."

Cross, 41, said she would have rather lived her life without ever having breast cancer but the disease, which is the leading cause of death in women age 40 to 55, has been a blessing in disguise because it has brought her closer than ever to her family and friends.

"Having cancer never crossed my mind," said Cross, an administrative specialist at the Roseanne R. Hartwell Women's Center at Florida Community College at Jacksonville Downtown Campus. "I was like a lot of women who work and have families. I was busy, and I didn't have time to be sick. Obviously, everything has changed, but I am surrounded by a very supportive

family and group of friends. I am blessed to have such wonderful people in my life."

That positive impact has helped Cross deal with the side effects of chemotherapy, which include nausea, fatigue and a high risk for infection.

"The music Andy plays makes me more relaxed," Cross said. "It really helps me not focus on all the chemicals going into my body."

Cross's doctor is Jeffrey Harris, an oncologist with Baptist Cancer Institute. He said Cross is making good progress, and Bruck's music seems to have helped other patients who are receiving treatment.

To receive a free packet of information on breast cancer awareness, call the hospital care line at Baptist Medical Center at (904) 202-2273.

"Many patients have enjoyed his music, and it seems to have had a calming effect on them," Harris said.

Mary Johnstone, holistic nurse coordinator with Baptist Medical Center, said she has seen some great results from the use of music therapy with patients, especially those with cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

"I have mega stories I could tell on what I have seen, but I would like us to do more research so we can document what we see," Johnstone said. "Holistic and traditional treatments complement each other and this therapy [music] seems to help patients relax and gives them an overall sense of happiness that helps them forget things for a while."

Johnstone may get her wish.

Physician Neil Abramson, director of education and research at Baptist Cancer Institute, said the institute is considering a research study to look at the effects of music therapy on patients.

"This is a very stressful office," Abramson said. "There is a lot going on and a lot of activity. There are people here with serious diseases. They are stressed, their families are stressed and the staff is stressed. What this gentleman is doing pervades through the office when he is here and even after he is gone. Irving Berlin once said at the end of a concert that the song has ended but the melody lingers on. The effect of what this man is doing lingers on."

While Bruck has received accolades for his endeavors, he credits Cross for giving him his inspiration.

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for how poised she is and the manner in which she is dealing with this," Bruck said. "This is a serious matter, but she is always full of cheer and keeps a positive attitude, and both of these things will help her recover. I find her to be quite inspiring, so the inspiration goes both ways."

Cross, who has no history of breast cancer in her family, is among 70 percent of the women who have discovered lumps in their breasts while doing self-exams.

"I was never very outspoken about the importance of doing breast exams, but I am now," Cross said. "It really can save your life."

According to the National Breast Cancer Foundation, when breast cancer is found early, the five-year survival rate is 96 percent. The Foundation's statistics say that, because of early detection, over 2 million breast cancer survivors are alive in America today.