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Fall 12-16-2019

Putting a Face to Cancer

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By Lenn Robbins

On the same day in January of 2018, I walked into three hospitals as a patient.

The concierge at the first facility responded to an inquiry in a bored, rote voice, “Third floor.” The concierge at the second hospital never looked up from his New York Post as I breezed past.

In the lobby of the third hospital, a concierge I hadn’t seen in six months, a man whose name I didn’t know and rarely had spoken to, broke into a huge grin when we made eye contact.

“Hey buddy, how you doing?!” he exclaimed as he rose from his stool. “How you doing? I been thinking about you. Come here and give me a hug.”



Nick Medley, 56, hugs like a cartoon mama bear. Maybe we don’t want every hospital concierge to be so warm and cuddly but not every concierge works at one of the world’s leading cancer hospitals – Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

Medley knows he might be greeting a cancer patient for the first time, or the last. He knows each patient he greets - some every day, some every few months - could be deteriorating or improving.

Medley says a cursory acknowledgement to any person walking into MSKCC's 53rd Street location won't suffice. He offers himself up as a human welcome sign.

"Every patient that walks through that door is my patient," said Medley.

Of course, they are not his patient, but Medley knows the names of most patients and the type of cancer they're battling. He knows because he asks.

Most of all, he knows, firsthand, the fear, confusion and anxiety a patient might be experiencing. He knows because he's been there.

Two weeks after starting work at Sloan in 2001, he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had the gland removed. He experienced the tsunami of emotions most cancer patients describe.

It also wasn't his first brush with mortality.

Medley spiked a dangerously high fever when he was four. His grandmother, Pearl Medley, who never left work early, had forgotten her purse at home that day. She came back to find her grandson cradled in his mother Penny Medley's arms, his eyes rolled back in his head.

Pearl and Penny rushed their child to Medstar Southern Medical Center in Clinton, Maryland. What came next has baffled and tantalized scientists, doctors, and theologians since man could philosophize. Medley had suffered seizures so severe he went into cardiac arrest. Doctors declared him dead.

"It was complete blackness and I felt as if my body was going up," said Medley. "There was a pinpoint of light, like the tip of a pen. And then I heard a voice. 'Go back. You're not complete yet.'"

Medley was released from the hospital six days later. He believes that experience led him from that childhood near-death experience to working with patients, some of whom might be facing their own mortality.

After moving to New York in the mid-90's and working an assortment of jobs, most in freight transportation logistics, the company shuttered. A friend told him about an opening at Sloan. It was not like anything he had done.

"I didn't know much about the place," Medley said of Sloan. "I knew it was a hospital for cancer patients. But when I walked in for my interview, it was so peaceful. Everyone was so kind and eager to help. It was a big pay cut from my last job but I knew I belonged here."

Medley's first job at Sloan was as a doorman/greeter. Seven years later he landed his current job, concierge in charge of overseeing the hospital's patient transportation system.

Sloan provides shuttle service for patients to its 19 locations in Manhattan. Medley also arranges ambulatory services and private car transportation. For international patients, or patients unfamiliar with the metropolitan area, Medley takes out the anxiety of getting from one MSKCC location to another.

“I’d never been outside Iowa until I was diagnosed and my doctor recommended I come to Sloan,” said Brian Farber, 47, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. “If you don’t grow up here, you have no idea how intimidating the city can be. The shuttle service takes that off me. It may not sound like much but when you’re fighting for your life, everything you can take off your plate helps.”

Medley told an anecdote about a fellow concierge who saw a woman sitting in the entry lounge for hours. She had missed her ride home. The two began conversing and learned they lived just blocks away from each other in Queens. The concierge drove the patient home.

The staff at Sloan describes this as the Medley Affect.

“He has such passion for he does and is so committed to the patients that he makes you want to do better,” said Joyce Caldwell, a junior concierge. “We see miracles here and he’s one of them.”

Medley has come to call Sloan home. The oldest of three boys, Medley never married. He has 12 godchildren and seven nieces and nephews. And he has the hospital.

“I never saw myself working in a hospital, doing this work,” he said. “But this is my calling. When I go home, my heart is full with joy and sometimes sorrow. Either way, I know I’ve lived a fulfilling day. I’m not sure everyone can say that.”