

“Kim Graham- Survivor and Teacher”

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The Radiation Therapy program at UW-L has a strong tradition of excellence by training radiation therapists to be patient centered in their daily practice. As program director and an instructor, I am passionate about our students entering the workforce as patient centered healthcare providers. It is difficult to expose them to these types of experiences during the first year of their professional program as they are not part of the clinical environment until their second year. In the first year, we discuss at length through patient care, pathophysiology, and professional issues courses; the most important part of what we do as radiation therapists is to be centered on the patient. I am a firm believer that “no one cares what you know, until they know that you care”. They study and bury themselves in their books to prepare to become this patient centered provider. However I often wonder as they begin their clinical experience, if they truly have the skills to be patient centered. Talking about it is one thing, but experiencing it is another thing. As I began to plan for the current academic year and a new cohort of students, I started looking for ways for them to be part of service learning. It was my hope for them to gain valuable patient centered care experience prior to entering the clinical setting. My idea of engaging them in service learning took an unexpected change of course with some news that I received two weeks prior to the academic year commencing.

One my students, set to begin her first year in the program, Kim, a survivor of Ewing’s sarcoma, found out that her primary tumor had recurred in her lung. This would be the third time this disease would require her time and attention. Kim, now a senior at UW-L, has been surviving this disease since her initial diagnosis the summer prior to starting her freshman year of college. The first year of treatment required surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy to the lung. Kim completed a year of education during that time. Finally, Kim was able to come to UW-L and she completed almost a full academic year. In the spring of that year, her sarcoma reared its ugly head in her wrist. Kim endured another year of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. Finally after another year of completing not only courses of treatment, but also academic courses, she was back at the UW-L and an applicant to our program. She was admitted with ease out of a very competitive pool of applicants. I recall thinking that this was an extremely focused, motivated, and resilient young woman. Upon hearing the news of her recurrence and hearing the fear in her voice, I immediately advised her to defer her admission to the next year and take the year to get additional treatment. Her response surprised me, she said that her goal before her first two courses of treatment was to be a radiation therapist, and now that she was admitted to the program, she did not want to wait any longer to begin reaching her goal.

Kim found out what limited treatment options she had, made arrangements to receive them while she was at school, and began the program with amazing strength and focus. Her treatment, a clinical trial was to be received an hour away from UW-L at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, requiring her to miss class once per week. As I conducted orientation to this new group of students, I explained Kim’s situation to her classmates and asked that they be willing to help her with missing notes or any questions that she might have as a result of missing class. They all nodded in agreement and so began the busy pace of the fall semester. What happened in the weeks to follow was so impressive to me. The students not only made sure that Kim had her notes from the missed classes, but they would have study sessions with her. They would go to her house and essentially teach her what they had learned in class. This greatly helped her, but also allowed them greater mastery of their own learning as they were teaching it to her. Additionally, they would bring her food after her long days of treatment,

plan movie nights to go and hang out with her and keep her company. What I thought was going to be making sure notes were taken for her turned out to be so much more.

Three months into the fall semester, Kim had more scans which showed that her tumor had grown despite the clinical trial. This was devastating news to everyone, yet I was surprised how calm she was when she shared the news with me. Her focus was still fixed on what she needed to do next to get better. Thankfully, she was able to find a surgeon who was able to completely remove the tumor from her lung the following week. Kim missed about two weeks of class and returned very weak and in a lot of pain. Again these students rallied around her by picking her up for class, carrying her backpack, bringing her meals, and keeping her company since she could not be out of the house much. In the classroom, they would wear masks, use hand sanitizer, and clean their desks and chairs before she arrived to help ward off any threats to her weakened immune system. Slowly she regained her strength and went on to successfully finish her first semester in the program.

At the end of the semester Kim was able to impact additional lives as she and some of the students in the Radiation Therapy club shared fleece blankets they had made for the cancer patients at Gundersen Lutheran. She was able to talk with the patients and shared that she understood what they were going through, as she had been a patient as well. It was very moving and inspirational to see her provide empathy and support to these patients. We have been inspired by her will to live and four months after her surgery, she is still cancer free; and still pursuing her dream of being a radiation therapist. She provided to the students in her class and me, a curriculum of service, understanding, and empathy. The impact that her journey of survival has made on all of us is something is exceptional and could have never been captured without her presence.



Kim on the right is pictured comforting a cancer patient at Gundersen Lutheran with a warm blanket. Photo courtesy of John Kerrigan, Gundersen Lutheran publications