

# Rising Up

**Gayden Carruth's biggest challenge fighting cancer was overcoming its emotional toll. Now she's helping others learn how to cope**

**T**wo days before Christmas find most people preparing for merriment. But Gayden Carruth found herself spiraling back to a place of paralyzing anxiety.

It was Dec. 23, 2005, when Carruth received the call that every cancer survivor dreads: A biopsy of her swollen lymph node confirmed that the rare gynecological cancer first diagnosed six months earlier had returned. Michelle Dudzinski, M.D., an oncologist at Saint Luke's Cancer Institute, delivered even worse news: It was Stage III, and she'd need surgery in five days, followed by 35 rounds of radiation.

"I'm someone who doesn't volunteer for invasive procedures—I actually hyperventilate if I have to give blood," said Carruth, a Parkville, Mo., resident. "I was terrified."

## Taking the back seat

For a woman used to being in control and stoically handling whatever life tossed her way, Carruth found herself in an emotional whirlwind.

She was set to retire June 30, 2005, after 20 years as a school superintendent. But 18 days before her last day, Carruth's gynecologist informed her that the nodule found during an exam was malignant. She referred Carruth to Saint Luke's for surgery.

One night during Carruth's June hospital stay, the reality of her uncertain future hit home. "I can tell you the exact time: 7 p.m.," she said. "That's because the school board was convening what would've been my last board meeting and I was absent—for only the second time in my career."

To make matters worse, Carruth worried about her family: Her daughter, who has multiple sclerosis and lives in the Netherlands, was adjusting to motherhood; her older son and his



**Fully committed** Three years after her cancer treatment, Gayden Carruth is tenacious about follow-up exams and screenings. In fact, she now advocates the importance of follow-up care to other patients.

family lost everything in Hurricane Katrina; and her youngest son was heading to Baghdad for his National Public Radio job.

While doctors provide a 1-to-10 scale to rate physical pain, Carruth said there wasn't a reference to measure the emotional pain she felt while laying in that hospital bed, worrying about her situation.

"I felt alone and frightened, but I'm the proper-upper and had to be strong for my family," she said. "You can't take a pill for emotional pain—it's a visceral fear."

## Finding solace in others

Because Carruth's cancer was so rare—it affects only 0.6 percent of women—she felt isolated and needed an ally. She joined a support group, and she eventually located a local woman who'd suffered the same type of cancer.

"There's nothing like talking to others who've experienced your fears and understand what you're going through," she said.

Carruth also found solace through other coping techniques—similar to those advocated through Saint Luke's Cancer Resource Center. (See "Tending to Your Needs.") She used music therapy and journals to work through the psychological and physical symptoms.

For example, she kept a "grateful journal," a nightly ritual where she listed three to five people or things she was grateful to have in her life. And Carruth kept an "event journal" where she tracked medications and side effects she experienced.

"These help me on those days when I'm down because I can go back and read them to see just how far I've come," she said. "While there's no clinical evidence of cancer, I don't think in terms of 'I've been cured.' The fear is always there, but support groups and journals help me keep positive."

## Moving on

A long-time Saint Luke's Northland Hospital Board member, Carruth now serves on the boards for the Spelman Medical Foundation and Saint Luke's Hospital Foundation. She often speaks to cancer patients about her experience and is a vocal proponent for Saint Luke's Cancer Boot Camp. (See "Cancer Crusaders.") Her goal is to help others overcome the psychological burden.

She likens cancer's emotional toll to Greek mythology's Sisyphus, cursed for eternity to push a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down.

"I often felt like I was rolling that rock up the hill," Carruth said. "Some days the burden wasn't so difficult; other days it seemed insurmountable."

"I plan to keep rolling that rock up the hill. And if I can help other cancer patients keep moving theirs in the right direction, I will." ✦

## Cancer Crusaders

**Patients learn to fight cancer's physical and psychological fallout at Saint Luke's Cancer Boot Camp**

**E**nduring cancer treatment is a unique experience. But patients share common emotional struggles and physical challenges. That's why Saint Luke's Cancer Institute provides another resource to fortify their fight: Cancer Boot Camp. Led by psychiatric nurse practitioner Linda Huber and licensed clinical social worker Bridget Byrne, Cancer Boot Camp is four weeks of intensive classes to help patients and their families cope. "This is our way of meeting patients' needs in a fun and educational way," Huber said. "Saint Luke's is the only area hospital that offers this resource."

**Cancer Boot Camp includes:**

- + **Emotional Martial Arts**—techniques for managing emotional pain and the strain on interpersonal relationships
- + **Defeating the Insomnia Insurgents**—sleeping strategies to help give bodies much-needed repair
- + **Victory Over Fatigue**—strategies for decreasing the physical and emotional fatigue associated with cancer treatments
- + **R & R from the Battlefield**—various relaxation techniques, including guided imagery and biofeedback. ✦

For more details about class location and time, see Up & Coming on page 4.

## Tending to Your Needs

**Saint Luke's Cancer Resource Center helps cancer patients—and their families—cope**

**L**ooking for information about cancer treatment? Need help with daily tasks? Want to talk about your feelings? Saint Luke's Cancer Resource Center provides an array of services to those who've been touched by cancer or want to learn more. Located in the Medical Plaza III building, across the street from Saint Luke's Hospital, the Cancer Resource Center offers:

- **Transportation**—rides to and from appointments
- **Volunteer support**—ranging from help grocery shopping to tackling chores like building wheelchair ramps
- **Appearance accessories**—including hats, wigs, scarves, and prostheses
- **Lymphedema therapy**—treatment to deter lymphatic fluid buildup and bloating
- **Behavioral health services**—a psychiatric nurse practitioner and a licensed clinical social worker or support groups like Saint Luke's Cancer Boot Camp (see "Cancer Crusaders")
- **Spiritual guidance**—help from a chaplain
- **Educational resources**—a library, free classes, and Internet access
- **Oncology consults**—access to a nurse specializing in cancer treatment
- **Massage therapy**—a popular resource for reducing muscle tension and anxiety
- **Art therapy**—twice-a-month sessions for self-expression

For more information, call NurseLine at (816) 932-6220 or visit [saintlukeshealthsystem.org](http://saintlukeshealthsystem.org). ✦