

MY MOTHER'S STORY

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I am an American citizen and have resided in Florence, Italy for the last 28 years. Two years ago my 85-year-old mother was admitted to Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, one of the 10 best hospitals in the USA, and was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I left my family in Italy to be with her and assisted her all day, every day, and sometimes all night, during her almost three month stay in the hospital. After several successful treatments of chemotherapy and a few good weeks at the Rehabilitation Institute, she was almost ready to return home. However, due to an unfortunate complication, she passed away while in the hospital. Because of her lengthy stay, I had the opportunity to observe and interact with the hospital staff on a daily basis in many sections in the hospital, including the Intensive Care Unit, the Emergency Room and the Rehabilitation Institute. I was especially impressed with the excellent care my mother received and the technologically advanced facilities that were available to her. I was particularly grateful to my mother's oncologist. He communicated to me his sincere wish to do what was best for my mother and he did not give up hope. His optimistic spirit sustained me through many moments of despair. I will never forget his genuine concern and involvement. He was an superb doctor and I felt that both my mother and I were very fortunate to be under his care.

In response to my hospital experience, two extraordinary activities have developed since my mother's death. One is a lecture series that I have been invited to give in several medical schools in the USA. In April 2002, I spoke to the first year medical students of Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and in December 2002 I spoke at the Grand Round

of the Neurosurgery Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago. My lecture is about my mother's story, my story, and the importance of the doctor. I point out what our oncologist did to make a difference – how he gave us hope, how he felt our pain, how he was our refuge. I want my listeners to know how important it is to learn the skills of caring, of communicating, and of showing compassion not only to the patient, but also to the family. Through these lectures I hope to show my great appreciation for the unique dedication of the doctor. (I am happy to email a copy of my lecture to anyone interested.)

The other activity – my photo project – developed because of the great amount of time I spent with my mother in the hospital. Along with my mother I experienced endless hours of loneliness, staring at sterile, white hospital walls. Out of desperation to bring life and color back into my mother's life during her stay, I decided to alleviate the cold and unfriendly hospital environment by decorating her room with my enlarged photographs of underwater scenes and landscapes of Florence. Immediately, her room had a more comforting atmosphere. The photos had the effect of boosting my mother's morale and also quickly became a topic of conversation for the hospital staff, other patients and visitors.

Although my mother did pass away in the hospital, I think that my photos made the last days of her life a little bit more pleasant. Upon my return to Florence, while mourning my mother's passing, a thought kept coming into my mind. If my photos had such a positive effect on my mother, perhaps they could help other patients and families to feel more comfortable, to take their minds off their illnesses if only for a few moments.

Because of this experience with my mother, my mission now is to place colorful, soothing photographs of nature and beautiful places from around the world in hospitals. My wish is to give hope and comfort to patients and their families, visitors, and caregivers, to help soften the often stressful hospital experience. My hope is that those who view my photos will feel the joy and love I felt while photographing the scenes for them.

I have already placed my photographs in many hospitals in the USA and Italy, the most recent being the new Day Hospital Oncologia Medica of Dr. Francesco Di Costanzo at CTO, Careggi in Florence. There I gave 64 framed 50 x 70 cm colorful photos of Florence, Tuscany, the Dolomites, tropical beaches, underwater scenes (I scuba dive), and animals. And the request for my photos is increasing. There are so many hospitals with white walls that my mission is endless. Thus, I have created The Foundation for Photo/Art in Hospitals, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation, to allow this project to expand. I intend to seek funding from corporate, public, and private donors to continue this project. I am humbled and encouraged to continue because of the enthusiastic, positive feedback from patients and hospital staff who are already viewing my photos in hospitals.



