

REFLECTIONS



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The gift of Sam

Kathy Andersen, RN, MPA, OCN

Many years ago as a new nurse, I had the pleasure of caring for a 24-year-old patient, Sam, who was a medical student in the nearby medical school. Sam had osteogenic sarcoma, which had been diagnosed when he was in high school. One leg had been amputated but he had a relapse in his second year of medical school. Sam would come into the hospital for his treatments around his hectic schedule, very often on weekends.

Sam stood out because he was one of us— young and soon to be a member of the health care profession. But he was also a delightful human being. He made friends easily with everyone involved in his care, especially the nurses. He loved playing jokes on us, and he did it often. One night, I experienced Sam's sense of humor first hand. Earlier in the evening, Sam had put his prosthetic leg in the bathroom doorway, making it look like he had fallen. When I saw the leg protruding from the door, I swung into action to help. Instead, he was in his bed waiting for my heroics. The entire floor got a real laugh that night, and that was only the initiation for me; there were many other funny times to follow.

I had been a medical technologist before I was a nurse, so I was a few years older than my counterparts. While I had exposure to patients, I didn't know what it was like to be a nurse in a hospital. These nurses taught me how to be a good nurse, and these patients taught me how to be compassionate, understanding, empathetic, and hopeful. Sam taught me the power and the value of humor.

Sam's mother was a gentle woman with an ever-present smile who brought in for the staff what she brought in for Sam. Freshly

baked cookies, cakes, chocolate—she made anything that might get him to eat. She came in with goodies, and she would sit and read while he studied and ate! When Sam's condition deteriorated and it became clear that he was dying, it was hard for all of us to admit to this. We nurses needed Sam's mother to give us strength as much as she needed us.

I was taking care of Sam one day when his mother came in. I asked her how she was able to give cheer and hope to all of us and her son. She told me that she had had a dream one night in which God told her she could have a son but that there were conditions attached. When she asked what they were, God said, "I will give you this boy, Sam, but you can only have him for 24 years. Then I will take him back." "What is my other choice?" she asked. "I will not give you a son at all," came the answer. Her reply to God was, "Then I will take this wonderful son, because to have him, know him, and love him for 24 years is a blessing and a gift. I will willingly take that rather than never knowing and loving him at all."

I have carried this in my heart for 30 years and have told this story many times to many people who are having a difficult time with a dying relative. I believe that Sam's mother was sent to me along with her son to give me this message, not only to help my patients but to help me in the hard times with my own family. I thank her and Sam each and every day for this wisdom. I know one day I will see his smiling face again. ■

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