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Plantings symbolize survivors of cancer

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Families of victims share honors at Garden of Hope

Rick Johnson has a bit of advice for anyone about to come down with cancer: Make sure you're married first.

"I'm not kidding," said Johnson, 43. "I could not have survived this if I didn't have my wife. All I had to do was be sick. She took care of everything else."

Because cancer doesn't just impact the person diagnosed with it, the families of cancer victims were honored alongside the survivors themselves Tuesday morning at the unveiling of the Intergraph Garden of Hope at the Huntsville Botanical Garden.

In the spring and fall, Intergraph selects three survivors to honor, and those honorees select what they want to be planted in their space. Pansies - which symbolize friendship - were a big hit in this round of autumn planting. Also spotted in the gardens were rosemary for memory and thyme for courage and strength.

Intergraph CEO Halsey Wise said doctors and theologians consider planting gardens to be therapeutic. He hopes the end result will also create catharsis for these three families and inspiration for everyone who walks past them.

Rhondalyn Acklin

With the composure and wisdom of someone much, much older, Rhondalyn Acklin said she cried only for a little while after her mother explained in March that her Hodgkin's disease diagnosis actually meant she had cancer.

"It took her a while to tell me what it meant," said Acklin, a 16-year-old student from Oakwood Academy. "No one wants to have to tell her daughter she has cancer. But after I was upset for a little bit, I got over it. I'd still get shaky when I had to explain to my friends what was going on with me, but I was OK about it.

"I realize that everything happens for a reason. Maybe it was just so that I could be here and bear witness today."

Acklin had surgery and chemotherapy at St. Jude in Huntsville for 12 weeks as well as at the hospital's main facility in Memphis. Radiation followed.

When clumps of Acklin's pretty dark hair began to fall out, she took it in stride and she shaved her head.

"It's just hair," said Acklin, who has been in remission since July. "I knew it would grow back. I looked at it as a sign that the treatments were working.

"My parents raised me with a positive attitude. That's the only way to approach something like this. I'd go to the hospital early in the morning, get chemotherapy, then go to school. Before I knew it, it was over."

Meg Ingram

Meg Ingram's mother said her 21-year-old daughter has never allowed herself to have a negative day since she got her brain cancer diagnosis in August 2006. Not even in July, when another brain tumor was discovered despite nearly a year of chemotherapy.

"She refuses to give up," Meg's mother, H.J. Ingram, said. "She is going to live her life to the fullest, chemotherapy or not."

Feeling ill from the more aggressive form of chemo she's been on since the summer did, however, keep the former University of Alabama cheerleader from attending the garden ceremony Tuesday. Instead, she stayed at home and sent text messages to her mom and sister, Madalyn.

"She wrote things like, 'Tell everyone I wish I could be there,' and 'I love you' and 'I woke up feeling better today,' " Meg's mom said.

Three weeks after Ingram's brain surgery last summer, she was cheering on the sidelines in Tuscaloosa. By the end of the season, she was doing stunts.

Her mom said Ingram is now taking courses online and has every intention of finishing school and becoming a nurse.

Nursing wasn't initially Ingram's field of study. But after a kind nurse named Lori at the University of Alabama at Birmingham Hospital graciously tended to her, Ingram knew what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

"Meg told me, 'I want to do for someone else what Lori has done for me,' " H.J. said. "Lori had cancer when she was 16, and she went on to do this. And that's been her role model."

Rick Johnson

He shouldn't have tongue cancer. He's never smoked. Regardless, this past March, an odd sensation in the back of Johnson's throat evolved into a mass on his tongue, which turned out cancerous.

Before chemotherapy and radiation could shrink the tumor, the Harvest man had to have a feeding tube and tracheotomy.

Now, his prognosis is excellent, and he's working to regain his strength and stamina.

For his garden, Johnson selected hundreds of bright yellow pansies, the same color as Lance Armstrong's LiveStrong bracelet.

"My son, Parker, has been living in that bracelet for years," said Johnson, who works at Intergraph. "And he's only 9 years old. So, we decided a big swatch of yellow was what we needed to do."

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