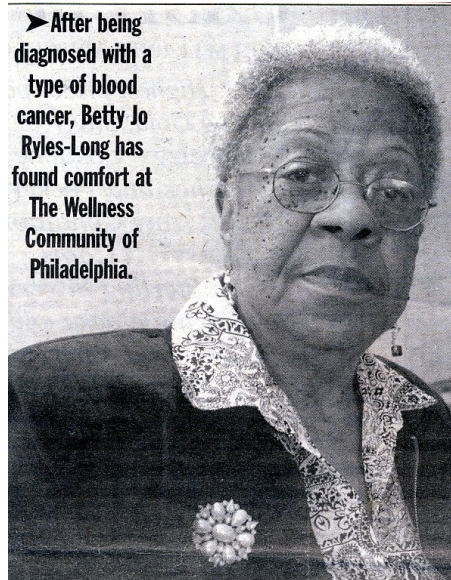


Restoring hope for cancer patients and their families

By Ruth Rovner

For the Times



Betty Jo Ryles-Long has had her share of challenging experiences. As a foreign missionary starting in the 1980s, she spent time in Israel, Africa, Jamaica and elsewhere.

But recently, the Frankford resident faced a different challenge much closer to home.

Two summers ago, she had a mysterious fall while walking up the driveway of her niece's house. There was no obstruction in the driveway and no apparent cause for her fall.

When she told her doctor, he did a series of tests and found that her blood levels were unusually low. This led to more tests and consultations with other doctors. Finally, she was given a diagnosis that took her completely by surprise: She had multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer.

"I couldn't even pronounce the name," recalls Ryles-Long. "I'd never heard of it, and never knew anyone who had it."

But that was soon to change. She began to learn more about her disease and started treatments to build up her blood count. Then she was ready for 15 chemotherapy treatments at Fox Chase Cancer Center. Her treatments ended last summer. Now she goes each month to have her blood checked and to get infusions if needed.

But besides the medical treatment, something else has been very important in her recovery. Soon after her chemotherapy ended, she learned about The Wellness Community of Philadelphia (TWCP), a non-profit organization that offers a wide array of programs for people with cancer.

The purpose is to help them enhance their health and well-being and restore hope, regardless of the stage of their disease. The programs include support groups, educational workshops and mind and body classes such as stress management and nutrition. Programs are also open to the families and friends of people with cancer.

Ryles-Long soon became an enthusiastic participant of TWCP. "I feel good whenever I go," she says.

The 71-year-old widow, who lives independently, takes SEPTA's Paratransit every Wednesday and Thursday to get to the West Fairmount Park headquarters of The Wellness Community.

On Wednesday mornings, she's in a support group for people with all types of cancer. Led by a licensed facilitator, they share experiences and information. It's been especially helpful to meet three others who also have multiple myeloma.

"They look things up on the Internet and bring back very helpful information," says Ryles-Long.

In fact, it's been so helpful that she recently enrolled in a computer course at her public library so that she, too, can have access to more information.

"I want to learn computer skills so I can educate myself about my disease," she says.

On Wednesday afternoons at The Wellness Community, Ryles-Long is in a group titled Mind and Body.

"We practice meditation and relaxation," she explains. "It feels wonderful! Because we have cancer, we have a lot of anxiety. But this teaches us how to relax."

On Thursdays, she returns to TWCP for a yoga group. On the floor, the participants practice their breathing and stretching, and do yoga postures especially suited to their fitness level.

"It's helped me so much!" says Ryles-Long. "I feel better able to cope with my situation."

And because she feels better thanks to TWCP, she's been able to resume other activities, especially her Sunday school teaching. She's been teaching at Bible Way Free Will Baptist Church in West Mt. Airy on Sunday mornings for more than 30 years.

Her students are 9 to 12 years old, and she gets to Mt. Airy with Paratransit.

"I love young people, and I want to continue to do this," says Ryles-Long.

Family life is also important to her. Of her two adult sons, one lives in Atlanta but the other lives only eight blocks away. Two of her five grandchildren, all in their 20s, live in Philadelphia. And so do her three great-grandchildren, ages 3, 2, and 10 months.

"They've all been very supportive," says Ryles-Long, who grew up in a family of eight — four girls and four boys. Of the eight siblings, four survive, and Ryles-Long is the oldest at 71.

It's a close family, and last summer, she felt well enough to join in a family vacation in Ocean City. There were 25 family members who occupied three houses. Now she's looking forward to another gala family vacation this summer. This time, it will be in South Carolina.

In the past, she's been on travels much farther than the South. In the 1980s, she participated in a number of foreign missions. The two- or three-week stints took her to Israel, Nova Scotia, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Africa.

In all these places, she taught youngsters about the Bible. She and her fellow missionaries also helped care for their needs: she brought them clothes and food and took them for doctor's appointments.

"Whatever they needed, we were there to help," she says.

Her mission to Liberia was especially memorable.

"My heart is in Africa," she says. "I love the people, and my heart especially goes out to the youth."

Indeed, her missionary experiences have meant so much that even though she's now coping with Stage 3 multiple myeloma, Ryles-Long hopes she can undertake another mission sometime in the future.

"If I get stronger, and if the doctors and the pastor approve, I'd like to try another one," she says.

She's not counting on it, but she's not ruling it out, either. Instead, she's determined to live her life as fully as possible and not be defeated by her disease.

"You take one day at a time," she says. "And whatever treatment I need, I'm going to do it. My philosophy is that I'm going to beat this. It's not going to beat me!" ••

For information about The Wellness Community of Philadelphia, call 215-879-7733 or visit the Web site www.twcp.org

On Friday, June 6, The Wellness Community sponsors the 10th annual "Celebration of Hope," an educational conference from 8:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency at Penn's Landing. The program includes a wide range of guest speakers. It is free to people with cancer and their loved ones. For information call 215-879-7733 or go to www.twcp.org to learn more or to register by May 30.