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Focus on Cancer Recovery Is Goal of Cedarville Graduate Student

CEDARVILLE, OHIO – How do you beat cancer? Cedarville University graduate student Karen Wonders knows it takes a strong heart and a nourished soul.

Wonders is the founder and executive director of Maple Tree Cancer Alliance, a nonprofit physical rehab program for cancer patients that will open its fifth Dayton-area office September 5 at the Kettering Cancer Center in Kettering, Ohio. She will graduate this year from Cedarville University’s Master of Ministry program.

Maple Tree operates offices at four other locations: Soin Medical Center, Beavercreek; Greene Memorial Hospital, Xenia; Upper Valley Medical Center, Troy; and the Life Enrichment Center, Dayton. Maple Tree offers cancer rehab to patients free of charge.

While exercising during cancer treatment may seem extreme for patients knocked flat by chemotherapy, radiation or surgery, Wonders has learned that getting them on their feet will improve their chances at remission and recovery.

“Exercise minimizes the side effects of treatment,” she explained. “But only 2 percent of cancer patients nationwide participate in rehab.”

One side effect of treatment is cardio toxicity, where the heart muscle doesn’t pump as efficiently as it should.

“Oncology staff will monitor heart function throughout treatment,” Wonders said. “Once they see a decrease in heart function, they will stop that treatment and start a different one, but the new treatment is not as effective as the first.

“The longer you’re able to get the more effective medicine, the longer you’ll be able to fight cancer, so you do see an increase in cancer remission rates, and a decrease in cancer-related mortality because of exercise.”

Exercise also fights the weight gain sometimes associated with breast cancer and prostate cancer. “That always catches people off guard,” Wonders said. “Most people think, ‘I have cancer; now I’m going to lose all this weight,’ but then it’s the exact opposite. They put on 25 pounds, and that weight gain is associated with a whole host of other problems – heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. And all of these other things increase your risk of mortality.”

Plus there’s a financial benefit as well. “The data shows there’s cost savings to the Maple Tree program, not only for the patient, but for hospitals and insurance companies too,” Wonders said. “Even with good insurance, cancer treatment is expensive. Patients who go through our program have fewer emergency room visits, shorter lengths of stay in the hospital and fewer 30-day readmittances.”

Adding the faith element is the dimension that brought Wonders to Cedarville. “I became a Christian in 2009 and started working on Maple Tree a year later,” she said. “I really felt called to focus on physical and spiritual health. The spiritual side was really difficult because I did not feel equipped. I’ve shared the gospel, but to really speak to someone who is suffering and walking through something like cancer, I didn’t feel like I had much to offer but ‘look to Jesus.’”
Wonders is now in the midst of adding a spiritual care component to Maple Tree, which includes training for churches. “Church is the perfect place because we’re called to love one another and bear each other’s burdens,” she said.

Support groups exist, but they don’t start from a Christian spiritual basis, Wonders said. “In these groups it’s just assumed, if you die you’re going to heaven, so don’t worry. If patients make peace with their diagnosis, then they’ll say ‘I’ve found God,’ but that peace means they’ve accepted they will probably die from this,” she said. “But they’re not in church, and they don’t know Jesus.”

“Since I started Maple Tree, I have felt this encouragement from God that this is what he has for me, and it’s something bigger than I could imagine,” Wonders added.

Wonders sees Maple Tree reaching for the skies. “I think this program should be in every cancer rehabilitation facility,” she said. “We have the data to prove it works. If I had cancer, I would do this, and if someone I loved had cancer, I would recommend it for them. If I believe in it that much, then we need to take it to everybody.”

Wonders earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in exercise physiology from Slippery Rock University, and her doctorate in exercise physiology from the University of Northern Colorado. She is a professor of exercise physiology at Wright State University and program director for Wright State’s exercise science program.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,760 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 100 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.

Photo Cutline: Cedarville University graduate student Karen Wonders is living out her God-given mission as she brings exercise and spiritual support to battle cancer.