

A CSJ PROFILE

"I Live in Joyful Hope"

an interview with Barbara McHugh

Barbara McHugh, CSJ was educated and nurtured by Sisters who influenced her future. It was because of this influence that she began thinking of entering religious life in the eighth grade. A graduate of St. Mary's School, Brookline, MA, Aquinas Junior College, Newton, and Suffolk University, Barbara entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston in September, 1980. Embraced by the Sisters, Barbara began her journey. After her Canonical and Apostolic Novitiate years, she taught at Sacred Hearts School, Bradford, for 10 years as an elementary school teacher in a ministry that was created for her. During these years Barbara pursued her Master's degree in Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College. Presently, Barbara works as a Campus Minister and Theology teacher at Arlington Catholic High School. As Campus Minister, Barbara coordinates retreats, liturgical celebrations and service programs for young adults. She also teaches three classes: Social Justice, Introduction to Catholicism, and Introduction to the Old Testament. Always musical, (she grew up in an Irish family) Barbara uses this gift in the CSJ Sister's Chorus, which she helped form 20 years ago. Another part of her ministry includes preparing funeral masses. She feels, "Music can be comforting to people. To bring comfort to people is a gift that God has given me."

This past year Barbara was diagnosed with stage-one ovarian cancer and stage-two endometrial cancer. After major surgery and follow-up treatment her prognosis is good. Barbara was kind enough to speak openly about her experience and hope for the future.



Q. Can you describe your initial feelings/reactions upon hearing your diagnosis?

A. My initial feelings/reactions upon hearing my diagnosis included feeling numb, nervous, stunned and confused. Questions I kept pondering were, "How can I tell my family, friends and local community? How could this be? I was not feeling sick. What did this mean? I am too young!"

Q. How has your life changed since you were diagnosed?

A. I certainly value and appreciate every day. The support that I have received from family, friends, local community, colleagues at work, and the entire Congregation was quite remarkable and overwhelming. Because of my diagnosis, I do try to eat right and get some extra rest. I did lose quite a bit of weight during the process and I have come to appreciate the importance of a proper diet. It does not mean that I cannot occasionally have some favorite foods, but it is important to make choices and eat in moderation.

Q. From where do you gather your strength?

A. I gather my strength from God. Initially, after my diagnosis, I found prayer difficult. The only words I could utter were - "Be with me God, in all of my troubles." (Psalm 86) I was not hearing a response. I began to turn to childhood prayers that always helped me when I was begging or asking for something. I prayed the Memorare continually. I prayed many rosaries - so much so that I broke the cross off my rosary beads. Sometimes when we can't find the words to pray, we turn to prayers that once gave us comfort. I believe that is what happened to me.

I received a lot of support from my family, friends, and local community. I received a lot of cards, telephone calls, gifts, and numerous prayers that gave me such comfort in my time of need. I will never forget the faithfulness of my family, friends, and the Congregation.



Q. What advice would you give others experiencing serious health issues?

A. *Pray, Pray, Pray. Seek advice from others: medical personnel, family, friends, and spiritual guides. Try not to dwell on things too much (easier said than done.) Read articles, but don't be too consumed with the Internet, etc. Every person is different. Continue to have regular check-ups. I was one who often avoided doctors, but as I aged, I knew that it was important to find a trusted doctor. I am thinking about joining a cancer support group to have a forum for discussion.*

Q. How do you envision the future?

A. *The day after my surgery my surgeon looked me directly in the eye and said to me, "There is a lot of hope here." As I look to the future, I live in joyful hope. I am trying to be happy, to trust in God and take things, "One day at a time." I do try to pick my battles and not "sweat the small stuff." Life has become too precious for me to waste any day on worry. Throughout my ordeal I never said the words "poor me." I know that the strength I received during this "sabbatical" time came directly from God. In my early years I would often become emotional at "little things," but throughout this experience I have found that I was able to endure some hard times with great strength and zeal.*

Q. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A. *Very simply I would like to say thank you to:*

- *God - my rock and my strength.*
- *My family - my brother Kenny and sister-in-law Janice and their children for their unwavering support and unconditional love.*
- *My friends - especially Paula, for their prayers, love and faithful support.*
- *My local community for their support and for relieving me of my house duties, cooking, charges, etc.*
- *The Congregation for "storming the heavens" with prayers, numerous cards, emails, telephone calls, etc.*
- *My colleagues at Arlington Catholic for their prayers, support, and words of concern.*
- *My medical team:*
 - Dr. Rosemary Corderi, my wonderful primary care doctor*
 - Dr. Robert Kim, my surgeon, and his tremendous staff*
 - Dr. Lily Lawn and the radiation/oncology staff at Caritas St. Elizabeth*
 - Dr. John Mignano and the radiation/oncology at Tufts New England Medical Center*
 - Ann Marie Giovino and Joanne Mauldin, our wonderful Congregational nurses.*

Cancer has changed my life. I am no longer the person that I was before my surgery. During my illness, someone gave me a book that challenged me to believe that a cancer diagnosis can sometimes be a blessing in one's life. I believe that I have been blessed to see my own goodness and the goodness of others. I am challenged to make the most of my days on earth, to see wrong and try to right it, and to enjoy the best that life has to offer. 🎵

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