

Rita's Story



There are times when one story leads to another story and takes you on a journey through time and events that are interconnected and too precious to lose. In writing the story covering the years of Joe Appel* being the treasurer of the Berrien County Cancer Service (BCCS), one of the people I contacted was **Rita Reid** who had sat on the BCCS Board of Directors with Joe for many years. In speaking with Rita, I knew that she also had a story to tell about the history of BCCS. I met with her and her granddaughter, Renée who is also a current member of the BCCS Board of Directors. Rita had recently been sick, but Renee' assured me that it would be okay to interview her saying, "Gram needs a distraction". Though looking a bit pale, the spark in Rita's eyes and the sharpness to detail assured me that Rita was remembering these events like they were yesterday, despite her 91 years young.

The Berrien County Cancer Service grew out of the Michigan Chapter of the American Cancer Society (ACS) in 1948. A few years prior to this, the Michigan Chapter of ACS had started a program to reach out to those with cancer. Two people who were involved with this start were Olove Colcord, R.N. and Rita Reid, an executive marketing agent. One of the issues that Olove was adamant about for the need for the cancer patients to have nurses visit them in their homes. This was prior to the day of nursing agencies and there were only a few county nurses. A division occurred over this need for nurses in the home, caring for patients. The American Cancer Society decided that their emphasis was on research and education which resulted in the birth of the Berrien County Cancer Service.

At this point, Rita wanted to make sure that I understood the lack of cohesiveness among the various United Way (or pre-United Way) organizations during the 1940-50's. There were several United Way agencies within Berrien County itself, each requiring its own presentation. Rita stated that in making presentations, she was adamant to make people aware that BCCS was dealing with people's lives and had to have financial security. She emphasized how it was a local United Way that came to the rescue with funding for the fledgling BCCS organization. She mentioned the names of Dr. Kent Hassen, M.D., Dick Willard of F & M Bank, along with Howard H. Paxton of Paxton Advertising and others who had the vision of supporting this new organization under the direction of Olove Colcord. She laughed when she explained how she and Joe Appel became substitutes for their bosses on the board with Joe taking over the treasurer position and Rita taking over as marketing director during the late 1950's. Since that time, the diverse local United Ways have become a cohesive agency known as the United Way of Southwest Michigan. Since our inception, BCCS greatly appreciates the support of United Way as well as many local individuals and businesses. Without this community support, BCCS would not be able to have skilled nurses visiting the Berrien County cancer patients in their homes.

Rita gave much insight regarding the environment of cancer in the 1950-60's. "Back then, people kept silent. They didn't want to talk about cancer. We did a lot of education about the danger signs of cancer. People now get to the doctor much earlier. They are not afraid of the word, "cancer" like they were years ago. Many people live with their cancer now. Now a days, many people have insurance companies that take care of the nursing, treatments for cancer patients have changed, and early detection is emphasized." While the health care environment has changed in many ways from what Rita has described, BCCS continues to be relevant and service patients who are often not eligible to have a skilled nurse come into their home as well as provide patients with medical equipment and supplies.

She described how Olove would make nursing visits around Berrien County along with a projector and a film about breast self-examination. "Olove was a nurse, business woman, and sales lady with great respect to her. She knew that

the only way to keep going was through the contacts of people who would support us. Olove was my best friend who I admired professionally and she had a great sense of humor.”

With a gleam in her eye, Rita stated that she had had 3 types of cancer. “At age 53, I had uterine cancer which was treated with surgery and cobalt treatments. Back then my grandchildren couldn’t come to see me in the hospital so they would stand on the sidewalk and wave at me from the street level. There was also not the shielding of radiation that the radiologist does now. I have scars on my abdomen from those treatments. I also developed gastric lymphoma at age 80 related to the cobalt treatments. I had a port inserted, chemotherapy and radiation for that. Then I had a radical mastectomy for breast cancer.”

Rita retired as an active member of the board to take care of her husband when she was 65, but continues to be an honorary board member to this day. She states that she is, “Proud of the fact that my granddaughter, Renée Parnell, is on the board”.

One of the things that impressed me about Rita was when she described how she would do research marketing analysis to evaluate the distribution of cancer in the area in making her presentations. She understood how to present the need based upon data that financial people could understand. This has given BCCS a foundation that has kept us going for 65 years. The Berrien County Cancer Service owes much of its success to Rita and others like her who not only had a vision but also had the ability to carry out that vision. We are grateful to them and to those who continue to serve us in such a self-sacrificing way.

*Written by:
Nancy Church
Executive Director
Berrien County Cancer Service
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Note: Since the time of this interview, Rita has undergone major surgery to remove a malignant tumor in her abdomen. She is recovering well.

**Joe’s Story can be found on the bccancerservice.org website under 2013 newsletters.*