

Cancer patient promotes hope

March 09, 2015 8:45 AM Melanie N. Cross

mcross@tulane.edu



Martha Jean Williams, a uterine cancer survivor, is a mentor and patient advocate for women who have experienced gynecologic cancer like she has. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

"I think our most important task as human beings is to transfer hope to one another." That's how Martha Jean Williams, a uterine cancer survivor, describes her new roles as Tulane Cancer Center's Woman to Woman Program mentor and patient advocate to the National Cancer Institute's Uterine Cancer Task Force.

Her physician, [Dr. William "Rusty" Robinson](#), head of the Section of Gynecologic Oncology at the Tulane University School of Medicine, nominated her to both

voluntary posts.

Through Woman to Woman, Williams will interact with gynecologic cancer patients to discuss concerns, provide advice or just hold their hands. Her personal cancer experience, combined with training in active listening, effective communication and addressing cultural differences, will help promote their survivorship.

“When I was growing up, you never knew a woman even had cancer. It wasn't talked about,” Williams said. She feels she would have benefited from a patient mentor during her cancer journey.

“I didn't know what to expect, what to do, how to think. Hopefully, I can prevent others from feeling this way.”

As patient advocate on the National Cancer Institute task force, Williams will help establish priorities for federally funded clinical research involving uterine cancer, the most common gynecologic cancer in the U.S.

“This group's importance has perhaps never been greater,” said Robinson. “There has been an unexplained increase in the uterine cancer death rate in recent years, especially among African-American women. However, an unprecedented number of molecularly targeted drugs intended to treat uterine cancer also have been developed recently, creating exciting new opportunities for clinical research trials.”

When asked to consider her trajectory ? going from “we don't talk about these things” to counseling patients and now joining the national cancer dialogue ? Williams paused briefly, smiled and said, “I truly believe there is a reciprocity in everything we do. I will show up with love and respect, and will ultimately receive more benefit than I give.”

The [Woman to Woman program](#) is an initiative of the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund. The [Tulane Cancer Center](#) received a \$50,000 grant from this organization in early 2014 to start a program in New Orleans.

Melanie Cross is manager of communications at the Tulane Cancer Center.

“When I was growing up, you never knew a woman even had cancer. It wasn't talked about.”—Martha Jean Williams, patient advocate