

# Opinion: Those with cancer provide life lessons

By Kathryn Reed

Thirteen months ago a good friend of mine was diagnosed with lung cancer. She died in August.

My dad survived colon cancer; though he is no longer alive.

My friend, Joy, taught me things I didn't learn through dad's experience. So many things that I have since apologized to my mom for not being there for her – or dad. Mom said different experiences teach us different things. Still, I wasn't there in ways I should have been and for that I will always feel a bit of shame.



Joy and AJ

Joy didn't have any family in town to care for her. And those who are in the Bay Area came up sporadically.

Dad had mom. I went to one of dad's chemo treatments. I didn't offer to go to more and I'm pretty darn sure it was one of my sister's ideas I go to that one. At the time, and I was in my

30s so it's not like I was a kid, I didn't get how hard it was on a caregiver. And it's any caregiver, not just those of cancer patients who have it hard.

My dad was always so strong. I clearly didn't get the gravity of the situation. Now I do. It took another death after he was gone for me to get it.

Few people ask the caregiver how they are doing. Caregivers are afraid to complain for fear of looking shallow or uncaring. After all, they have their health. Seldom do they get a break from a job they certainly never asked for. And the thanks from the patient is not always forthcoming – after all, that person is likely fighting to live.

And when it came to helping Joy, I really had it easy. Though, that is not say it wasn't emotional.

I was one of three key friends who helped Joy in her last year. A year ago I would not have expected to write that last sentence. Life, illness and death have a funny way of bringing people together.

Lisa, Wendy and I had wine together – we were the three friends – about a month before Joy died. Joy knew we had gathered to decompress. It was good to chat – about Joy and other things.

Caregivers need that.

I only hope my mom shared with her friends as dad went through chemo.

Joy taught me so many things I didn't know I needed to learn. She was also still learning. She figured out how to ask for help – even though giving was more her style.

“When I talked to Joy soon before she passed away she was so thankful. She said, ‘You guys are so good.’ We are not good. A lot of us see a need,” said Jonnie Crawford, president of the

South Lake Tahoe Cancer League.

At the holidays last year Joy bought box after box of Sees for friends. I was not about to tell her I don't really like their chocolate. It was never about the chocolate.

Joy taught me how to live and she taught me how to die gracefully.

Eventually, Joy no longer talked about the future and instead all of our conversations were about the past. That's when I knew she knew she wasn't going to see if Obama would be re-elected. (To say she was an ardent Democrat is an understatement.)

I kept listening because she had more to teach.

And even though she is not here physically, she keeps teaching. I just hope I'm listening well.