

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Life-changing moments keep on coming

They don't happen often but when they do, life-changing moments have a way of ... well, changing one's life.

And usually not in subtle ways. They can be good changes or bad.

Indeed, some people call graduations a life-changing moment. Looking back at my graduations, they were more transitional moments than all that life-changing. Now marriage, that's a valid call as a life-changer because, well, your life is changed from that moment on. For better or for worse, if you will.

Then, there is another life-changer out there we don't like to ponder: a major medical diagnosis. For me, I've had two of those.

The first was in 1994, at the age of 29, when I was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor on my tongue that led to surgery and radiation treatments that literally changed my life in very direct observable ways.

My speech became distorted. My ability to swallow food was made more difficult. My chest and neck muscula-

ture was altered as part of the reconstructive surgery (which was done here at what at that time known as LSU Hospital).



Jeff Benson
Columnist

In short, I survived that life-changer. In fact, I learned to work around the shortcomings it brought into my life.

In the end, I beat that one.

My second moment came Aug. 21 this year. That was the day it was verified: I have Stage IV cancer in the back of my throat.

Twenty years later, and I'm suddenly thrust back into cancer treatment mode. It has literally consumed my life lately with doctor visits and treatments. In November I finished my first round of chemotherapy at Willis-Knighton Cancer Center. It's been an interesting experience. Indeed, my first time with the drugs, and my first time taking this level of care from the local offerings.

Overall, I have been impressed by what Shreveport-Bossier City has to offer cancer patients from around the region.

Between Willis-Knighton, Christus Cancer Treatment Center and Feist-Weiller Cancer Center, we have many choices when it comes to primary care, second opinions and the latest treatment solutions.

My initial findings this time began with a visit to the ear, nose and throat specialist at WK Bossier Health Center over trouble I was having swallowing. Due to his concern, he sent me to the ENT department at Feist-Weiller for a follow-up that eventually led to confirming my diagnosis.

Unfortunately, my treatment options are limited mostly due to the fact that I've had radiation treatments in my neck area before. According to the doctors, it is a bad idea to irradiate tissue that has already been subjected to that treatment. It's bad for the bones. It's bad for the blood vessels. It's just bad.

Surgery wasn't really an

option, either. According to the Feist-Weiller surgeon on my case, it would be physically radical and there would be no assurances all of the cancer would be removed. That pretty much left chemotherapy as my only option, so I ended up in a consultation with Dr. Anil Veluvolu, hematology/oncology, at Willis-Knighton Cancer Center.

Dr. V, as everyone in his office calls him, not only impressed me, but more importantly, impressed my wife, who has become my personal health care champion since the diagnosis. I'm not sure if it was his personality or the scruffy farm boots he wore with his scrubs during that first meeting, but he set her mind a little more at ease that we had options before us.

It was nice to know before going for a second opinion at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. After five days of more consultations and pretty much the EXACT same tests that were done here in Shreveport and Bossier City, the MD doctors offered the same suggestion as the Shreveport doc-

tors — chemo.

That's why we opted for treatment at Willis-Knighton with Dr. V.

So far I've been impressed. The Willis-Knighton facilities are roomy and the staff is friendly (I was kind of amused by the way they announce the drugs as they administer them like the wait staff in a restaurant will sometimes do). In general the experience (though something I'd rather not have to do) has not been as bad as I anticipated. Mostly, that's because I was able to take the treatments here at home rather than having to travel to Houston or elsewhere for them.

Indeed, my whole family has been grateful to have Willis-Knighton Cancer Center, right in our backyard so to speak, as well as the exceptional doctors and staff who work there. I just wanted to share that appreciation with readers as I work on overcoming Cancer 2.0.

Jeff Benson edits the Conversations page and is community connections columnist for The Times.

CHARITY PROFILE

HEART OF HOPE — A SANCTUARY FOR WOMEN

By Sherry P. Shephard
sshphard@shreveporttimes.com

Name: Heart of Hope — A Sanctuary for Women.

Location: 10420 Heart of Hope Way, Keithville.

Mission: To meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of young ladies facing a crisis pregnancy by walking beside them as they decide whether to parent or to place for adoption; to help them set career goals by instituting a plan of action; to commit to aftercare for those who are not ready or able to return to their former life.

Executive director: Jodi Burns.

Board members: Ann Inabnet, Shannon Leone, Joey French, Ronny Walker, Chris Victory, Jim Hutchinson, Kristen Powers and Kay Asher.

Signature event or fundraiser: Heart of Hope's annual fundraising banquet is Feb. 12 at the CenturyLink Center in Bossier City. Attorney J. Michael ("Mike") Johnson will be the keynote speaker. Last year's event raised \$120,000. An opportunity to make a financial gift will be extended. Dinner is complimentary. For information, visit heartofhopeministry.com/events.

To volunteer or make donations: Call 925-4663 or visit heartofhopeministry.com to get involved and to see a current needs list.

Question: What specific services are provided through Heart of Hope?

Jodi Burns: Heart of Hope is our community's only maternity home. We are licensed by the state because we knew we would have minors who needed a safe refuge away from the pressures and chaos that surround an unplanned pregnancy. I often say, "We are a home expecting." Through on-site professional counsel-



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Heart of Hope provides a safe haven for young women who are pregnant to enjoy a quiet and peaceful environment where they can focus on what's best for their family.

ing, life-skill training and continued education in the computer classroom, young women are released into a purpose driven life. Opportunities are created for spiritual renewal in family devotions, personal Bible study and corporate worship. Intentional living brings emotional healing and empowerment to make better choices, resulting in a confident parenting decision, single parenthood, marriage or the gift of adoption.

Q: What is the one thing you hope to accomplish through your mission?

J.B.: As young women living in today's culture where the

world tries to convince them how to look, act and speak, our earnest expectation is that when they leave Heart of Hope, they will be equipped to live the life God created them for and be empowered to make healthy life-decisions.

Q: Where does the majority of your funding come from?

J.B.: As a faith-based organization, we do not receive funding from the state or federal government. We raise a little more than half of our budget in fundraising and the other through business, individual and church donations. While there is no cost to be a resident

at Heart of Hope, we do offer an opportunity for families to contribute to the ministry.

Q: What is one thing about Heart of Hope that people might not know?

J.B.: We are committed to support the parenting decision of our young women — single parenting or adoption. As a safe haven, our young women enjoy a quiet and peaceful environment in which to focus on what's best for her family. Whether she is 13 or 19, the most natural parenting decision is to raise her own child, and we help her be the best mom she can be through parenting classes and other life

skills. We have also had one-third of our young women choose the loving gift of adoption for their child.

Q: Do you work with volunteers? If so, why are they so important to your organization?

J.B.: We thrive on volunteers. It is important to be good stewards of the generous and sacrificial donations that are given to us in order to provide a safe home with loving house-parents to our young women. Volunteers make that happen through their sacrifice of time and talents. Our young women also experience the selflessness of others who choose to serve them with no expectations. This is as close to God's kind of amazing love as you can get.

Q: What is the process for someone coming into the home and how long are they allowed to stay?

J.B.: We are not an emergency shelter, so when someone calls or is making a referral, we set up an appointment for the young woman and her family to take a tour and meet our social worker and house-parents. They complete an application and receive all the information they need to know in order to make the decision to live at Heart of Hope. Our young women make a voluntary decision to move into our home. As a licensed maternity home, we are only able to care for the young women through the birth of their baby and then up to two weeks postpartum. It is a life event to be a pregnant teen. It is another life event to be a parenting teen. Our vision is to have another home for our young moms and their babies — a mommy/baby home. If we had a home like that now, we would have at least six of our past residents living there with their children.

Twitter: @sshphardLIFE

MEET THE STAFF

DOUG COLLIER
Visual Journalist
doucollier@gannett.com



JOHN PRIME
Military and History
jprime@gannett.com



HENRIETTA WILDSMITH
Visual Journalist
hwildsmith@gannett.com

