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Making the Cancer Connection:

Five Questions to Ask a Cancer Survivor That Just Might Save Your Life

When cancer comes up in conversation, do you change the topic and move on? Or do you ask the questions that may possibly save your life or the life of someone you love? Author and speaker Joni Aldrich tells you the top five questions to ask when the opportunity presents itself.

Winston-Salem, NC (July 2010)—No doubt about it: Cancer is a conversation stopper. It's a sad, scary subject, and most people would just as soon avoid it. If the "C-word" comes up at church, at work, or at a party, your first impulse is probably to change the subject or remove yourself from the group. That's a mistake, says author Joni Aldrich. Even if your life *hasn't* been touched by cancer—an unlikely scenario, by the way—there's a good chance it will be in the future. Rather than burying your head in the sand, why not look at the conversation as a networking opportunity?

That's right—networking. By gathering valuable information and forging connections with others who are dealing with cancer, you might well make a lifesaving difference when someone you love is in the same grim situation.

"We network all the time when we're looking to move up in our careers or promote our business or even find the right place to live," says Aldrich, author of *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95, www.thecancerlifeline.com) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95, www.griefbeacon.com). "It's our best method of gathering information to help us make smart decisions. Yet when it comes to a cancer discussion, many people turn away and run. It doesn't make logical sense.

"Every single day 4,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with cancer," she adds. "One out of every 26 people is a cancer patient/survivor. If you're a betting person, you'll know that

there's a good possibility that at some point cancer will invade your life or the life of someone you love."

Aldrich knows firsthand what it's like to live through a cancer war. In 2006, she lost her 45-year-old husband, Gordon, after a two-year battle against a rare form of cancer. She released her first book—*The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer*—to tell the story of the Aldrich family's experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer.

There were mistakes made at the first cancer treatment facility the couple trusted. Would things have been different had she and Gordon found the right treatment facility sooner? She'll never know, but Aldrich learned the hard way that "knowledge is your armor, and the right cancer treatment is your weapon." That's why she feels that networking about cancer is important—even before it affects your world directly.

"In my W-I-N method for finding the right cancer treatment facility and oncologist, the 'N' stands for networking," explains Aldrich. "Yes, cancer stories can be a downer, and it's certainly not a subject that you want to discuss all of the time. But rather than shut the dialogue down when the subject of cancer comes up, use the opportunity to gather as much information as you can—just in case you or someone you know needs the lifesaving facts that may be offered."

Aldrich adds that in her own experience, cancer survivors are among the best people, and they are usually more than willing to share their insights over adversity.

Read on for the top five questions you should ask when making an important cancer connection:

1. What type and stage of cancer did you (or your loved one) have? This is an important question to ask because no two cancers are alike. And even if someone has been diagnosed with the same type of cancer as you, the stage of his or her particular diagnosis may be different, and that can mean a drastic change in the treatment regimen.

The stage of cancer is critical, too. If the patient's cancer was stage IV, the battle would have been an uphill climb—and completely different from the experience of a patient whose cancer was a stage I or II.

"If you find yourself talking to a stage IV brain cancer survivor, or a pancreatic or esophageal cancer survivor, you've found a golden opportunity," Aldrich explains. "Take esophageal cancer—there is a low survival rate. While some cancers have low odds of survival, there *are* survivors out there. These are rare, but not so rare that it might not strike a family member or

friend at sometime during your life, and they may be able to provide you with vital information that you need to know.”

2. What was the primary cancer treatment facility involved in your (or your loved one’s) care? Aldrich says that one of the most important decisions you can make is where you receive your primary care. If you’re a cancer novice, you may not know that all cancer treatment facilities are not created equal. The best facility for you should be determined by factors such as having the right equipment for your particular cancer needs, in addition to on-staff qualified oncologists and a cancer team who deal with your type of cancer on a regular basis. Even more importantly, not all facilities can treat every type of cancer—and that’s information that you will want to know.

For example, some facilities do a lot of prostate cancer research, but only a handful will do research in multiple myeloma. And just because breast cancer is one of the more common types of cancer, it doesn’t mean that it can be treated effectively at every facility.

“Location, location, location—it’s absolutely critical,” warns Aldrich. “Yet, in many cases, patients focus more on getting treatments at a facility that is convenient to their homes or their jobs instead of focusing on their life-and-death battles against cancer. In fact, I dedicated an entire section of my book to detailed information about where you can go to find annual caseloads by cancer type for all of the facilities in your area, and methods for ‘interrogating’ your doctors regarding your treatment options.”

3. Who was the primary oncologist at that facility who directed your (or your loved one’s) care? Once you’ve established the “where,” it’s time to figure out the “who” of cancer care. There are many oncologists at every facility. Some are good; some are not as good. Some deal exclusively with lung cancer—others only with blood-borne cancers. Aldrich says that the next step is to find out the name of the oncologist—whether the result was good or bad. And be sure to write it down!

“If you think of your treatment facility as the ‘team,’ in charge of your care, then the primary oncologist is the ‘coach’ of that team,” explains Aldrich. “And they are not mutually exclusive in the overall success or failure of the patient’s treatment.”

And if the person you’re talking to speaks negatively of the doctor’s attitude, you may not want to place too much emphasis on it.

“In my personal opinion, bedside manner is somewhat overrated,” says Aldrich. “If someone I love is diagnosed with cancer, I want to know that his oncologist can keep him *out of bed*. His or her skill—not his or her personality—should be the focus. If you’re lucky, you’ll find a great oncologist who has both. But experience and knowledge are paramount considerations over everything else.”

4. What do you believe was the key to your (or your loved one’s) success? OR Why do you believe your treatment (or that of your loved one) failed? The attributes that lead to the success or failure of a cancer campaign are critical. Was the cancer discovered too late? Did the patient get a second—or even third—opinion? What was her attitude through the fight? Did she

have to wait a long time if she had a problem that came up, or was it addressed right away? Were there support groups available during her treatment, and did she take advantage of any of them? The answers to these questions can be vital information. And, if she doesn't seem to mind the question, find out if she was offered financial assistance.

“There are many key aspects to a successful cancer battle that can be pertinent physically, mentally, and emotionally,” Aldrich says. “Learn as much as you can from those who have walked the path before you. A cancer diagnosis is a life-changing event. Being prepared—if given the right opportunity to learn—makes good sense. And, you may be surprised to find a pattern regarding a specific treatment facility or even a specific oncologist.”

5. What organizations were the most helpful to you? Usually, cancer patients, their caregivers, and their families get information and support from cancer-related organizations. Ask the person which ones helped him the most. Aldrich recommends starting with the ones that are associated with your particular type of cancer.

“There are general cancer organizations such as the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, and the American Society of Clinical Oncology,” she explains. “Then there are organizations specific to your type of cancer. My husband, Gordon, had multiple myeloma and we relied on the Myeloma Institute and the International Myeloma Foundation. All of these can be accessed on the Internet or phoned for direct information. The support and information that they can provide may be invaluable to you on your cancer journey.”

Once you've asked these questions, pay attention to the answers. And try to get the information down on paper as soon as you can.

“The information you gather is only as good as your recollection of the details,” Aldrich concludes. “You may not want to take notes at a party or during a golf game, but try to write down what you learned as soon as it's convenient. And if you're truly inspired by the story, ask that person for her e-mail address—just in case you find yourself, a family member, or a close friend in a similar situation.

“Finally, whether the person you're talking to is a caregiver or a cancer survivor, make a point to congratulate her on being an inspiration,” she adds. “Both are tough paths, and the people who walk them deserve respect. And don't forget to thank her for offering the information that may someday save your life.”

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she

has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of her books. She feels it is her destiny to relay this true story to readers in a way that will help them in their own difficult trials.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal*. Her latest book—*Connecting through Compassion: Guidance for Families and Friends of Brain Cancer Patients*—will be available September 2010.

For more information, please visit www.jonialdrich.com, www.thecancerlifeline.com, or www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95) are available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.