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## SURVIVOR

A faint, distant rumble is heard over the light rustle of leaves at the Camp Meade RV Park. As the rumble gets louder, a green utility vehicle the size of a golf cart winds in and out of the shadows of trees on the trail. The driver of the cart, Sherry E. Rucker, pauses to wave at a few strollers on the path, her gold hoop earrings and bangles flashing a shine here and there. After parking, Rucker, wearing a royal blue, terry cloth jump-suit, rushes through the doors of the office where she works as a recreation assistant for the park.

“You can’t forget Sherry once you’ve met her,” said Richard J. Nalwasky, one of the business managers of the office and a coworker of the flamboyant and gregarious woman.

Although she is all smiles today, Rucker will never forget the day she found out she had breast cancer in September of 2005.

“It was the scariest thing I had ever heard,” said Rucker.

Her first thought when she received word about her condition was how she would break the news to her mother, who had lost her husband,

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brother and daughter in the prior three years to different forms of cancer, said Rucker. Remembering that day, she wiped a single tear that streaked her cheek and dangled on the edge of her chin.

“My mother said ‘Don’t you dare cry. You keep telling jokes and laughing. You are going to live.’ Then we prayed together,” said Rucker. “I knew then that I was going to be all right.”

Laughing and being friendly to the customers at the campground was all a part of her job before and after her cancer diagnosis, said Nalwasky. He recalled a time a few years ago when one elderly male camper was disgruntled about an issue and Rucker was trying to solve the problem. While the two were talking, Nalwasky brought the man a chair to sit down in.

“Even after the problem was solved, he was still sitting there chatting and laughing with Sherry,” said Nalwasky. “She has a way of making everyone feel welcome.”

Her co-workers and the RV campers got the chance to repay Rucker for her hospitality. The cancer in Rucker’s breast was found during a radiology test to diagnose an unrelated pain she had been having. Rucker underwent a total mastectomy of her right breast Oct. 19, 2005, and is free of cancer today and awaiting a breast

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reconstruction surgery, but she had to take a year off of work to undergo treatment. During the year she was recuperating, her co-workers seized the chance to help. Many people donated their vacation hours to aid her financially until her return to work in December of last year, said Rucker. Many campers wrote to her and visited her home.

While she was off work and going through chemotherapy, Rucker still found a way to connect with people to send a message of hope. She recalled receiving a call from a telemarketer offering an Internet service. Rucker explained she was unable to afford the service because of her illness. The caller was awaiting news about her own possible cancer diagnosis and was fearful of her future. Rucker offered the woman her address and phone number, and the telemarketer has called her twice since then for support.

“I have a big mouth,” said Rucker. “I can’t stop telling people about how I’ve been blessed.”

Another time Rucker was able to put a positive spin on her situation was during a shopping trip to a department store last summer. With her thinning hair in a bandanna, she was telling a cashier about how God had blessed her through her sickness by catching the cancer early enough to be treatable. A shopper walked over to Rucker and

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hugged her tightly, saying she was about to complain to the store manager about a product but overheard her story and became filled with gratitude.

“You never know whose life you’re touching with just a few sensitive words,” said Rucker.

Waiting to have a few words with Rucker are a couple of campers at the counter.

“I’m coming, Sugar Pie,” says Rucker as she holds up a hand with long fingernails painted royal blue and white to match her outfit. A few nails have been painted with pink and fuchsia flowers along with tiny jewels that sparkle as they move.

“What you see today is what she was like before the surgery,” said Nalwasky. “Her faith in God got her through.”