



Traci Owen, right, doing the best part of her job—connecting with a patient.

Meet Traci Owen

A nurse who advocates for her patients during treatment and beyond.

TRACI OWEN, RN, BSN, is a nurse. Her official title is survivorship care manager, but in her heart she is a nurse and always has been.

"I was born knowing what I am here to do. I don't remember a time I thought about doing anything else," Owen says. "I played nurse. I always planned to be a nurse—I was a nurse from the beginning. I laughingly say I don't think God gave me any other skills, so I have to use what he gave me."

And her skills are extensive. She became a certified nursing assistant at 17, as a high school student, and has worked in health care for 31

years. In the six-and-a-half years she has worked with Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Owen has felt that she has truly found her calling.

"I never planned to be an oncology nurse. I was a trauma nurse for many years and did stints in management. I was never fulfilled in an administrative role, and I kept hearing this voice in my head saying, 'Traci, you are a nurse,'" she says. "I figured out it meant I should be taking care of people. Within three days I got three calls from people at CTCA® asking me to apply. I kept thinking, 'I'm not an oncology nurse,' and

my husband pointed out that it seemed like a big neon sign pointing me in that direction."

Owen says that from the moment she walked through the doors of CTCA she knew it was where she belonged.

She began as a care manager in the radiation clinic and then moved to medical oncology. Care managers play a special role. "I think we're the heart. That's how I see care managers, as the heartbeat of the hospital," she says. Care managers try to act as lifelines for patients and families. Many people travel for treatment, and the care manager, usually a registered

nurse like Owen, is the first call if something goes wrong. Patients have one name and one number—the care manager's—to remember. They know that the person on the other end of the line can help get them the support they need.

"When they get home, maybe they are struggling with nausea or another side effect. They call us. We have standing protocols for how we handle any issue, but then we confer with physicians. We also proactively check in to see how they are tolerating treatment, because if there is anything we can suggest to help mitigate side effects, we want to be aggressive so they can stick with their treatment schedule."

Last May, she helped develop, launch and now manages the sexual wellness program at CTCA Southwestern Regional Medical Center. Helping couples connect is something she and her husband have been doing for seven years since beginning to mentor premarital couples in their church's Couple-to-Couple program. That experience, combined with her knowledge of the impact of cancer on emotional and sexual wellness, makes her uniquely qualified for the job. "I help patients restore intimacy in their relationships," she says.

Owen embraced the challenge of creating the hospital's program by

"digging in the dirt and sculpting up." Her job is to have the tough conversations many shy away from. She talks openly with patients and their partners about how, in some cases, cancer—both treatment and the emotional toll—can impact intimacy and sex.

With support from CTCA leadership, she helped launch the program because of what she saw happen to a number of couples during the cancer journey. "Patients arrive with a committed partner, but as treatment goes on and the battle ensues, you sometimes see that relationship become more like a patient and caregiver than like spouses. And there's no intimacy in the patient/caregiver relationship," she says.

As she saw more marriages begin to crumble, Owen wanted to offer a solution designed to help people stay connected, because she personally believes that a strong relationship may have an impact on how a patient tolerates treatment.

Some people are too embarrassed to bring up issues related to intimacy with physicians, and people ask Owen how she's so comfortable talking about sexuality. "I have worked in health care for so long and I have a blended family with six kids, so I am not afraid to talk about anything," is her response.

With a care manager, patients have one name and one number—the care manager's—to remember.

Owen offers a safe space. "I talk about the intimate parts of their lives that most people haven't ever talked about with a stranger—sometimes even their partners. It's a delicate dance," she says. But it's one she believes is important.

Her favorite part of her job is seeing a couple begin to move back toward one another. "I love to see them begin to reconnect and reclaim who they are. I see them stronger; they resume a sexual relationship, which is very connecting and important for a marriage. I may not be the trauma nurse saving your life, but now I have a role in maybe saving marriages."

As a care manager, Owen's focus is knowing what her patients need at any given moment. "I tell people when I meet them, 'Some days I am an encourager, others an educator. Some days I'm a cheerleader, others a butt-kicker. Whatever it is I need to do to help you get to where you need to be, that's what I do.'" ■



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5 Fun Facts



WHAT ARE YOU READING?

"Everything I read now is about sex! I am reading about testosterone and estrogen levels in cancer patients," Owen says.



WHERE WAS YOUR FAVORITE VACATION?

"My husband and I took a road trip, crossing Oklahoma, going into New Mexico and then into Colorado," she says. "We didn't have a plan, and that made it more fun. We live a structured life, and it was nice to have two weeks to meander."



WHAT'S THE BEST CONCERT YOU HAVE BEEN TO?

"The Eagles. I saw them last time they played in Tulsa—and my dad took me to one of their concerts when I was a kid. They're my favorite," she says.



HOW DO YOU RELAX?

"My husband and I do almost everything together. We ride motorcycles; he is the driver and I'm the queen on the throne—and I'm in charge of music," she says. "Our therapy is working in the garden. I also love playing with my two grandchildren; they are divine."



WHAT'S ONE THING YOU HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO DO?

"I have always wanted to go explore Alaska," Owen says. "I want to get out in the world. That is my retirement dream trip."