

Ruth Williams: Multiple Myeloma Awareness and Survivorship

Scott Redding

Welcome to the Cancer Wise podcast, where we'll discuss cancer prevention, treatments, the latest in research, and important news around cancer brought to you by the University of Michigan Health Rogel Cancer Center.

Erica Reist Bass

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. My name is Erica Reist Bass, and I am the Rogel Cancer Center's producer here at Michigan Medicine. I recently had the opportunity to sit down with an incredible woman, Ruth Williams, who is currently receiving care at Rogel for multiple myeloma.

This conversation that you're about to hear is from when I sat down with Ruth in her home and interviewed her to be the feature patient story for Multiple Myeloma Awareness Month. You can find her patient story video on Michigan Medicine's social media platforms, as well as our YouTube channel, which will be linked in the description.

Erica Reist Bass

All right. So we're just going to do a little warm up here. So can you tell me your name, where you were born and how old you are?

Ruth Williams

My name is Ruth Williams. I was born in a small place in West Virginia. It's called Gap Mills. I grew up on a 1500 acre farm. I'm 76, almost 77 years old. I'll be 77 in April. April. April 25th.

Erica Reist Bass

What was your first thought when Dr. Pianko reached out to you about sharing your story? Because I think he reached out to you and then you filled out the form. So I think he told you, hey, like, there's some folks who want to help tell your story. Like, what was your first thought?

Ruth Williams

Oh, you know, I told him that I was willing to do it, because if it's something that can be used to help others who have multiple myeloma, I'm quite willing to be a part of the work.

Erica Reist Bass

What is it you hope people will walk away with, though, specifically from hearing your story?

Ruth Williams



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I would hope that they walk away knowing that even though it's an incurable cancer, that there's still hope that they can still live a good life or they can still enjoy activities that they do every day.

They certainly can participate in just life itself. And just I would hope that just because you have multiple myeloma, that you don't see it as a death sentence. Because I've never seen it as a death sentence. Yeah. And I'm a firm believer that you can speak life or death through the power of the tongue. And I'm always one that likes to speak life.

Erica Reist Bass

Okay. So I'm going to ask you two questions here. Maybe three that are all kind of similar. I'm going to ask you how your friends would describe you, how your family would describe you, and how you would describe yourself. So first, I want to know how would your friends describe you?

Ruth Williams

I think that they would say that I'm fun loving, I'm organized, and I always like to be on time for events. I'm usually one of the first. They know that if there's an event, I'm going to be there early and on time. They know that they can count on me to do my share of work. Whenever we have something that we need to do. They know that I like to exercise. They know that I like to drive. So whenever we go to an event, I usually volunteer to drive because I enjoy driving and they seem to feel that I'm a good driver.

Erica Reist Bass

So what about your family, especially your children? I want to know.

Ruth Williams

Now that my children are older, they certainly respect me a lot more as a parent. You know, going through those teen years, that's the tough time. And so my daughter once told me that she thought that I was the meanest mother because I held firm on decisions that I made. And I would tell my children that is so important, as a parent, to set the example and expect children to live up to your example. And I didn't want them to be perfect, but I certainly wanted them to grow up to be successful and to be able to take care of themselves.

My son told me that most kids come home from college for a good meal. He came home from college for a good conversation because I was a vegetarian at the time, and he didn't like the food that I cooked. So we still have good conversations. They see me as someone who's always going to be there for them no matter what. Mom's going to be there and she's going to make sure that they are okay.

Ruth Williams



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And I think any parent would feel the same way. And they also know that I spoil the grandsons. Yeah, that was my job. I still enjoy my grandsons, even though they're teenagers. But I enjoyed them so much when they were younger, they traveled with me. I took them to swimming classes, skating... because I wanted to be an important part of their life as they grew up.

Ruth Williams

And I wanted to get to know them, and I wanted them to know me well as they were growing up.

Erica Reist Bass

I really trust that that's happened.

Ruth Williams

Yeah, and how I would describe myself?

Erica Reist Bass

Yeah, Ruth, how would you describe yourself to somebody or to me? You know, we're still kind of strangers. So what's like your core characteristics?

Ruth Williams

I'm a very strong willed person. I'm organized. I like things organized in a way that I know that things are going to be where I need them to be. I like exercising and staying physically fit. I enjoy driving. I don't like cooking. Cooking is not the high priority - it's not high on my priority list. I like try new things. I took some flying lessons because I wanted to experience, you know, flying an airplane.

Ruth Williams

So it was just a small plane. So I took three lessons. Enjoyed that tremendously. I didn't realize that learning to fly a plane can be a daunting experience. I saw the steering wheel on the plane, so I thought that that's how you steer the plane and that's not the way - you steer with your foot. And as a person who considers herself a very good driver, when I was trying to steer this airplane down the runway, I was all over the place.

Ruth Williams

So I realized that I'd have a lot of work to do in order to fly a plane. I would really like to skydive but oh, we'll see how that goes.

Erica Reist Bass

We talked about like how you start each morning and you mentioned the first thing you do once you get out of bed is make coffee... Can you just tell me about how you start your morning? Or your morning ritual?



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Ruth Williams

Well, I get up, I come downstairs, make a cup of coffee, eat a banana, take my meds, take my medication. I usually spend at least 20 minutes reading devotion time. You know, I'm a spiritual person. And so I like to always remind myself each day of my blessings, because sometimes we take things for granted.

Ruth Williams

So I always like to take time to thank my Heavenly Father for the blessings, seen and unseen, and just for being able to get up each morning and start the day. And once I have breakfast, I'm preparing to get ready to go for my exercise program.

Erica Reist Bass

So hearing you describe yourself, you know, as independent and strong and everything, I want to know, did that change at all with your cancer diagnosis? Do you feel like at any point you didn't feel strong or you didn't feel independent or did it or did it only like kind of like fortify that for you?

Ruth Williams

So I'm determined. I have strong determination. I was not going to let this cancer diagnosis ruin me, destroy me. I'm just not I wouldn't give in to it.

Ruth Williams

I wanted to stay strong and do whatever I needed to do to fight the cancer in my body.

Erica Reist Bass

That's the only answer I think I could have expected from you. Can you tell me what type of cancer you were diagnosed with? And when?

Ruth Williams

I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in 2011.

Erica Reist Bass

And what made you choose Michigan Medicine at the Rogel Cancer Center for your care?

Ruth Williams

Well, I started out with the the oncologist at Saint Joe's, Dr. Mackler Nicholas Mackler. I had been with him since I was first first diagnosed. The last treatment that I had, it stopped being effective. And so we had to look at the next step. So he asked me if I would be interested in being in a study, and particularly because the medication that he wanted me to take, POMALYST, the co-pay was so expensive and I knew that, you know, there was no way I could afford that monthly co-pay. So I felt that going into this study would be beneficial for me.



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Erica Reist Bass

How would you describe your experience working with Dr. Pianko and his staff? How has that been for you?

Ruth Williams

It has been wonderful. I enjoy him. He's a wonderful oncologist. I really enjoy talking to him. He's a great listener, and I feel that I can say whatever and I feel he will listen. When I first met him and we started talking and I didn't know how he would take this - I said, you know, I'm African-American and you know, that African-Americans have some concerns about what has happened to happen to them in the medical field.

Ruth Williams

And he said, I'm very much aware of that. And I got a sense from him that he was quite aware. And I didn't say that to make him feel bad or anything, but I wanted him to know that that's a concern as an African-American in a study that I would be concerned about. And he did let me know that, you know, if I had any issues, any concerns, any questions or if I even wanted to get out of the study, that I could, so I appreciated his honesty and his directness and his staff.

Ruth Williams

You know, I've had a wonderful experience so far with them.

Erica Reist Bass

Was he happy to also find out that you like to stay really healthy and active? I imagine that's really great for a doctor to hear.

Ruth Williams

Yes, yes .

Erica Reist Bass

So can you tell me what does being healthy and staying active look like for you on a daily basis?

Ruth Williams

I think that, you know, with multiple myeloma, I think you can have bone pain and I've had minor, but I think staying active has helped me not to have a lot of bone pain.

Ruth Williams

I do have neuropathy. Oh, that's my biggest concern: neuropathy in my feet, but that's my biggest concern. So I try to just move to keep my body strong and fit and well. I joke with some of my friends. I said, I can remember a time when my mother would get up in the morning and



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she'd sit on the side of the bed and she'd sit there for a while and I would say, Mom, why are you sitting there?

Ruth Williams

She would say, I'm just getting myself together. Well, I've hit that stage. I get up in the morning and I sit on the side of the bed. And first of all, I just give thanks for just being able to be alive, but just to kind of get myself together. And before I start my day and with multiple myeloma with this medication that I take, it can cause some dizziness.

Ruth Williams

So I find that walking helps to eliminate a lot of that. Just that dizziness. You know, I usually when I walk, I usually walk two and a half miles. Now, the first first 40, maybe a quarter of a mile, you know, I can feel the dizziness, but it dissipates as I continue to walk.

Erica Reist Bass

And what is it that you like about yoga specifically? Is it the movements or is it the breathing?

Ruth Williams

I think it's a combination of things. Certainly the breathing or, you know, we think we breathe right all the time. When I got to the yoga class and she said, you know, the instructor would say, you know, inhale and you you push your belly out, exhale.

Ruth Williams

You pull your belly in. So I had to kind of practice that. And that helps with the movements. I also like the movements because I think that it really strengthens my muscles.

Erica Reist Bass

What advice would you like to share with others who have recently been diagnosed with multiple myeloma? I know you kind of touched on this in the beginning with saying it's not a death sentence, don't let it take you down... But, you know, if someone was just recently diagnosed. What advice would you like to share with them?

Ruth Williams

I would say accept the diagnosis and then decide what you're going to do to stay healthy, to stay strong, to stay emotionally strong as well as physically strong. And to have faith in yourself that you can fight this cancer, and that you can live with it. It's a part of you. You can't change it. And so you have to find ways of accepting that which you cannot control. Each day, you know, I don't think about, oh, I have multiple myeloma.

Ruth Williams

I just think about getting up each day and just putting my best foot forward to meet the challenges of the day and to enjoy the joys of the day. Yeah, because you're always going to



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have challenges, but you also have joys and enjoy those joys. And I'll have to say that there are times when you don't feel as good, but that's part of having the diagnosis.

Ruth Williams

And you have to take the medication even though you may not want to. But I look at it as that's helping me to fight the cancer in my body, and it keeps me going keeps me moving forward, keeps me saying, I got this.

Erica Reist Bass

Is there anything I didn't ask you that you wanted to talk about or that you wish I would have asked you?

Ruth Williams

My mother had multiple myeloma. She was diagnosed with multiple myeloma back in in the nineties, and she lived seven years after her diagnosis. But she didn't have access to the kinds of treatments that I had that I have today. And I think that's remarkable. I think that there are a lot of new treatments coming out. And I hope at some in some in some way or at some point that they will find a cure.

Ruth Williams

Yeah. Well, the funny thing was that I asked Dr. Mackler, who was my first oncologist, I said, was there any way I could have just not gotten multiple myeloma? Is there any way I could have just not had it? And he said, no. He said, That's part of your DNA. I thought Wow. Yeah. And, you know, if that's the case, that's another reason why you have to accept who you are.

Ruth Williams

You have to accept this cancer and you have to accept the fact that you live with it. And you don't let it rule you. I say every day, I got this, I got this, I'm going to be okay. And that's what I hope. That would be my message to anyone who is diagnosed.

Ruth Williams

And, you know, I went through a stem cell transplant - that was not an easy thing to go through. I was in the hospital for 12 days. I think the biggest part was that I lost all of my hair. What woman wants to lose all of her hair? But, you know I learned to live with it when I said, okay, so I have, I have bald head.

Ruth Williams

It's not the end of the world. I can put a cap on. I lost my appetite. I lost about 15 pounds. Not that I had 15 pounds to lose but the food just wasn't tasty. But after a while, you know, my appetite returned and my hair grew back - not as long as it was originally, but my daughter says to me all the time, Mom, you need to color your gray hair.

Ruth Williams



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And my response to her is that I have earned the privilege of having gray hair. And I remember when I didn't have any hair, when I had the stem cell transplant. So the fact that I have hair on my head with gray hair, I'm okay with it.

Scott Redding

Thank you for listening. And tell us what you think of this podcast by reading and reviewing us to stay up to date on what's happening in the cancer world.

Scott Redding

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