

Fighting the good fight



Mary Essert exercises in the pool Tuesday at Conway AR Regional Fitness Center where she has taught aquatic fibromyalgia classes. Essert isn't teaching while she bounces back from another victorious battle against cancer, but she hopes to get back to coaching others on wellness soon.

Playing host to rapacious cancer is more than pain management — much more than being sick. The victim deals with oncology, urology, hematology, radiology, pharmacology and any other ‘ologies’ out there. And we mustn’t forget depression and fatigue.

For proof, see Mary Essert.

This elfin-like woman agrees with and connects with everything written here. She has been plundered of her right arm thanks to horrendous cancer. Yet she considers herself a survivor with a great husband and support system, never a victim.

“Another no-no,” she proclaims, rejecting the term sufferer. “Respect and dignity is what I want and need.”

It might be appropriate to say that Mary Essert has taken ownership of her cancer, aided by an early love of science and her provocative understanding of the disease.

It wasn’t too long ago that she carried credentials as a distinguished woman who had established a reputation as an aquatic instructor working with persons with disabilities.

“Since 1970 I have worked with and trained many therapists and swim instructors about amputees. I never expected this hands-on lesson. No pun intended,” she said.

It happened on Halloween last. “A little boy who came trick or treating asked me about my missing arm. I decided to teach a positive lesson and told him proudly that I have one good arm. I didn’t mention the arthritis in my good shoulder and elsewhere and two good legs.

Essert suffered sarcoma surgery in her right arm on Feb. 11, 2013 at the University of Arkansas Medical Center. Dr. Richard Nicholas was her surgeon as he was in 2007 when only part of the arm was affected. This time it was necessary to amputate the right arm to the shoulder.

Today Essert is caught up in therapies designed to deal with such issues as phantom pain. Dr. Sarah Harrington of the palliative care unit at UAMS is treating her for this curious ailment. "The phantom pain issue is quite real," she asserts.

Additionally, Essert says, she has discovered another therapy with an unorthodox name — mirror therapy. "I have faithfully adhered to it for six weeks and my pain is reduced maybe 30 percent and is more numb and stinging than acute now."

Cancer has been and continues to be a devilish foe for Essert. There seems to be no end to its devastation. She is a tough fighter though, poised with a knockout punch for her foe.

Essert is a lighthearted woman with a winning personality. She believes that the best medicine is reduced to these lines: "Keep on keeping on." She also learned that she is not the same person she once was; "And I hope my family, friends and colleagues can accept that."

As she recovers, this plucky woman says she performs her own aquatic exercise in the pool at the Conway Regional Fitness Center and walks a half an hour or rides a recumbent bike. "I hope to be back at the center teaching fibromyalgia classes Tuesday and Thursday mornings by Christmas."

Once a writer penned these lines: about Mary Essert: "She is elfin like in stature, yet her genius for significant work in the art of physical fitness is prodigious." Her mantra is said to be an engaging affirmation that declares; "Do the dance of the water" No doubt she is a woman of boundless energy. She is a published author, workshop leader and teacher, and a member of the International Swimming Hall of Fame and the Governor's Council on Fitness Leadership created to recognize people whose innovative work has advanced the health and fitness levels of Arkansans. A dozen or more publications in the field carry her name as author.

She is grateful for the Governor's award that comes after more than 60 years of teaching swimming, water fitness and rehabilitation programs with scores of seniors. She says with conviction that "I hope to continue for many more years."

Water, then, has been her own exercise. "I have worked in the pool daily through two bouts of chemotherapy for more than 16 months and 35 sessions of radiation. She has said that water is a panacea, a place where body, mind and spirit thrive.

When Essert captured the International Swimming Hall of Fame award, she felt that she had garnered all the top awards — until she won the Governor's Award which painted her as a luminary in the fight against physical inactivity and obesity in Arkansas.