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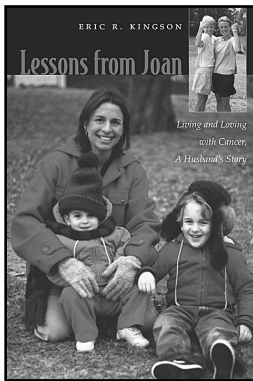
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## LESSONS FROM JOAN— IN KINDNESS, COURAGE AND HUMOR



*It is not surprising for **Ag**ing Today to receive a new book by Eric R. Kingson, one with a foreword by a distinguished policy authority, such as Commonwealth Fund President Karen Davis, who introduces his latest title. After all, Kingson, a professor of social work and public administration at Syracuse University, is widely regarded for his expertise on Social Security. But in his latest volume, *Lessons From Joan: Living and Loving With Cancer, a Husband's Story* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005 [www.syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu]), Kingson takes a deeply personal departure from public policy analysis. Joan Kingson was 47 when she began her 32-month struggle against metastatic colon cancer in October 1998.*

*In her foreword, Davis states, “Joan’s experience with the healthcare system has lessons for all of us. Most importantly, it illustrates the importance of ‘the heart’ in our healthcare system—for our patients, family members, healthcare providers and our culture.” In the following excerpt, printed here with permission, Joan’s story also shows the importance of supportive friendship and good humor at difficult times.*

By **ERIC R. KINGSON**

During Joan’s treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, we got to know some people fairly well whose lives also had been touched by cancer. Advanced cancer is like a club—a club you do not want to join! Membership provides those with stage 4 cancer, and those who are close to them, with choices that most others do not have to face explicitly. It forces people to look deep into themselves and their relationships. The lucky ones—and they are many more than you would think—find the courage and humanity to live, laugh, cry and continue to develop as caring human beings. Some of them become friends you never wanted to meet—at least not this way.

**Barry:** There was Barry Kearns. Funny and irreverent, Barry’s antics kept us laughing. The circular file was his solution to medical paperwork and bills unpaid. “What are they going to do, take my pump out? If I can get back to work, I’ll pay back as much as I can. But until then, I’m not going to worry.” Once, as Joan was receiving chemotherapy, we heard laughs and giggles. A nurse was placing an IV line into Barry’s arm. “Oh, yes, I like the way you do it.” Nurses walked by laughing. But there was also a very serious and comforting side to Barry. When Joan, terrified of the prospect of having a pump placed into her abdomen, first asked Barry about his, he helped allay her fears.

**Hanna:** Knowing Joan was having a difficult time with chemo, one day Hanna, a fellow Sloan-Kettering patient and then about 70 years old, marched into our room with a 32-ounce plastic soda bottle filled with tea—marijuana tea. “Can’t tell you how I got this, but it’s been helpful to me and thought you might want to try it.” Her gift was appreciated, but Joan—having had a bad experience with marijuana in college—did not use it. Through chemo and other surgeries, Hanna has held her cancer at bay. Recently I learned that she is free of cancer.

**Healthcare Providers:** We came to recognize the commitment of many who provide healthcare to people with cancer as a form of courage. The phlebotomist who searches out veins, the nurse who helps address

nausea, the chaplain who comforts family, the nurse's aides who get patients up and moving after surgery, the doctors and the nurses—each is challenged every day to not depersonalize and to remember that he or she is dealing with people with histories, skills and hopes. Some close off to patients. But, as numerous examples in *Lessons From Joan* attest, many have the courage to see the humanity in the people they serve.

**Joan's Last Words:** For almost three years, I had been the cheerleader, the one looking for the next treatment and the miracle that would allow us to grow old together. But by early May 2001, the goal shifted to Joan having a good death. Just after calling an end to continued hydration and nutrition, Joan said to me, "Eric, I don't know if I'm going to be able to die with you present. You bring me back." My response: "Listen, Hon, you die any way the hell you want." She smiled.

Mindful of her concern about my making it difficult for her to let go, a few days later, after she had drifted into a coma, I sat by her bed saying, "It's okay, Hon, it's time for you to go. It's time to die." Breaking through the coma for a moment, she said with a smile, "It sure as hell is, Eric!"

She died two days later, in my arms, a wry smile on her face. ❖