Eight-time cancer survivor stays positive

Almost everyone these days knows someone who is battling or recovering from a bout of cancer. But it's not every day you come across someone who has fought cancer a whopping eight times – and lives to tell about it.

Meet a true medical miracle: Anna Renault, an eight-time cancer survivor whose autobiography, "Anna's Journey: How many lives does one person get?" was published in February. In her book, Renault, a lifelong member of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex, takes a candid look at her bouts with cancer, crippling diseases, domestic violence and other near-death experiences.

Despite everything she has been through, she never once wants you to feel sorry for her. In fact, she wants people to know what a positive effect these hardships have had on her and that it is possible to survive.

Renault's first brush with death came in 1964, while she was at the beach when lightning struck, killing two of her friends. The following year, she was involved in a fatal car crash, when the driver — her boyfriend who had just proposed — lost control of the car and it slammed into a tree. He was killed, but she survived.

"How did I not get killed? The Lord works in mysterious ways," said Renault, 61, who is a published author, newspaper columnist, reporter and poet.

Her introduction to cancer came in 1977, when she was diagnosed with uterine cancer at only 27. She has also been affected by two bouts of colon cancer, two sets of ovarian tumors, two cases of skin cancer and, most recently, breast cancer.

In May 2009, she was diagnosed with a very invasive and aggressive form of breast cancer. Her rigorous treatments included multiple surgeries, radiation treatments and chemotherapy. In addition to the cancer, Renault suffers from heart episodes, a bleeding disorder and connective tissue disease (lupus), which makes treating her more complicated.

“Do your research and find the best doctor for your condition,” says Renault to anyone facing cancer or other serious illnesses. “And, you have to have a positive attitude to help with the healing. You can and will get better.”

“The Lord has put me in the right place at the right time for the best medical care to get me through each incident,” said Renault, who is currently being treated by several doctors at Mercy Medical Center, including Dr. Neil B. Friedman, Director of The Hoffberger Breast Center, and Dr. Peter Ledakis in the Institute for Cancer Care at Mercy.

“Anna is a patient with multiple potentially serious medical problems who has been through multiple procedures, tests and treatments, and she has formed her own experience and solid awareness on how her illnesses affect her and how they can be managed best,” said Ledakis, a medical hematologist and oncologist who has treated Renault for more than six years, through ovarian tumors, breast cancer surgeries and chemotherapy.

“She has maintained her optimism and her assertion that things can and will get better — despite the complicated picture — and I give her enormous credit for that,” he said. “She tries to be well informed, and she actively participates in the decision-making process.”

Renault is active in Mercy’s “Living with Cancer” support group, and she volunteers with numerous organizations, including the American Cancer Society, the American Cancer Society – Cancer Action Network and Any Soldier Inc. She has been selected to read one of her poems at Mercy’s annual National Cancer Survivors Day observance June 4.

“I don’t know why the Lord has chosen me and given me the strength, but I’m still here,” she said.

“People say I inspire them. People at church tell me that they have stopped complaining,” said Renault, who serves as an extraordinary minister of Communion (EM), lector and substitute sacristan at Mount Carmel. “They say, ‘I wake up with all these aches and pains, and then I think about everything you have gone through, and I adjust my attitude.’”

In addition to positive thinking and excellent medical care, Renault also credits the power of prayer to her survival. “I’m a firm believer in prayer and know that people’s prayers have helped me through my many trials in life,” she said. “Throughout the summer of 2009, word spread through my far-flung network … By 2010, the prayer chain for me stretched around the world. I’m simply blessed.”

For more information about “Anna’s Journey: How many lives does one person get?” visit www.annarenault.com.