

CHARITABLE GIVING

Friends for Life

When you meet Thomas Moore, Becky Michael and Julia Forsythe, your first impression is that they're lifelong friends who have gathered for a much-anticipated reunion.

Shown from left: Julia Forsythe, Thomas Moore and Becky Michael bonded during treatment at the Cancer Hospital.

The jokes come fast and furious and no one is spared a good ribbing. And no one seems to mind.

But the truth is that the three led separate lives and did not meet until a little less than one year ago when a dreaded leukemia diagnosis brought them together by chance and they had life saving stem cell transplants at The Cancer Institute of New Jersey (CINJ) at UMDNJ Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ).

Now, after a year of supporting each other through this crisis, the three can't imagine what their lives would be like today without their friendship.

"There is no such thing as TMI (too much information) between us," jokes Thomas, 52, of Princeton. "We share everything and that helps us know that what we are experiencing is normal."

"It's a unique bond; I can tell them anything" adds Becky, 42, of Avenel.

Julia was diagnosed in 2010, while Thomas and Becky learned they had leukemia in 2011 and all received stem cell transplants within days of each other. Typically, stem cell transplant patients undergo 7 day cycles of intense chemotherapy followed by a 30 day hospital stay until they achieve remission.

During a physically and emotionally draining time, the three found strength, inspiration and comfort in each other's presence. All three

credit their strong bond with saving their lives. The three met regularly in the Cancer Hospital's 4 North Unit lounge to compare notes about their treatment, share stories about their families and calm each other's fears. Thomas even coined a group mantra, "BLT" (Beat Leukemia Together).

"Every day, we would knock on each other's doors to see how each of us was doing," says Julia, 45, of Edison. "This (the lounge) was the only place that we could get together to sit and talk. There isn't anything that we wouldn't tell each other."

Becky adds, "I couldn't have done it without these two." Thomas notes, "Being able to talk to someone who knows what you're going through made a huge difference."

The lounge itself has recently undergone an amazing transformation thanks to the generosity of The Mama Mare Foundation, which led a fundraising effort to renovate and re decorate the space to provide patients and their families with a calming sanctuary at the hospital.

Led by former Monroe resident Krista Kasper, who lost her mother Mary Ellen Pernice at the Cancer Hospital following a courageous battle with breast cancer, The Mama Mare Foundation was founded in 2010 in memory of Mary Ellen to provide assistance to patients undergoing treatment for breast cancer and to advancing research toward a cure.

Now, Becky, Thomas and Julia attend support

group meetings in The Mama Mare Foundation Healing and Education Center. The Center provides a serene area for patients and families, and resources such as HP EliteBooks donated by Mama Mare to help patients research their diagnosis and treatment and stay connected to family and friends during their hospital stay. It also features "smart" furniture that allows individuals to plug in laptops or mobile devices, and a boutique to provide wigs, turbans and prostheses to cancer patients.

"When someone you love is undergoing treatment for cancer, it's an emotionally draining experience for everyone," Ms. Kasper explains. "We hope that with this room we can ease the anxiety of patients and families. I love knowing it is being used and wonderful things are happening there."

Becky, Thomas and Julia appreciate the Mama Mare Foundation's gift. They also feel blessed by the gift of life and friendship given them by their shared experience at CINJ and RWJ.

Visit www.rwjufdn.org
or call 732-937-8750.



Shown: The newly renovated patient lounge was made possible through a generous gift from The Mama Mare Foundation.

