



Education, empowerment, support

Pink Lemonade Project assists women affected by breast cancer

By Danielle Frost | November 19, 2013 12:00 am | [comments](#)



Allen and Cassie Gabriel founded the Pink Lemonade Project in 2010. The Camas doctors saw there was a lack of information and emotional support for women impacted by breast cancer, and sought to address that need.

“When life throws you lemons, make lemonade.” Almost everyone has heard this popular quote at one time or another in life. In 2010, two Camas doctors took it to heart and created the Pink Lemonade Project, which provides “critical support” to women impacted by breast cancer.

Dr. Allen Gabriel, a plastic surgeon with PeaceHealth Medical Group, and his wife, Cassie, with Columbia Anesthesia Group, saw there was a noticeable lack of information regarding breast cancer and women’s rights. In addition, Allen Gabriel noticed that many of his patients struggled with the emotional and psychological aspects of diagnosis and recovery.

“I have always had an interest in working with breast cancer patients and helping them,” he said. “During my residency, training and fellowship I noticed there was a real lack of emotional support. They needed help, but that which had nothing to do with family or a doctor.”

From that, the Pink Lemonade Project was founded. Gabriel approached Jeanne and Bill Firstenburg about supporting a retreat for breast cancer survivors. The Firstenburg family is well-known in Vancouver for philanthropy, and were enthusiastic about the project. Jeanne Firstenburg is chairwoman of the board of directors, and the family continues to support the organization.

Waste Connections is another community partner. They offer pink recycling cans to any person or business receiving their services in Clark County, with a \$200 donation to Pink Lemonade.

“Without the Firstenburgs and Waste Connections, and of course the community support, we would have never been able to grow our programs this quickly to better serve our community needs,” Gabriel said.

That first event at Menucha Retreat Center in the Gorge had 14 survivors and facilitator Susan Hedlund, the manager of the patient and family support services at Knight Cancer Institute at OHSU.

Feedback from the retreat was so positive that the Gabriels decided to expand the program to include couples’ retreats as well.

“We started seeing a real positive transition,” he said. “The women felt empowered. Everyone takes a cancer diagnosis differently. The important thing is, we want them to feel as empowered as possible.”

The organization recently began offering a metastatic retreat, for patients whose cancer diagnosis is fatal. For this event, they partnered with the Susan G. Komen Foundation.

“I lost a patient two months ago,” Gabriel said. “Before she died, she came to my office and said she’d gone to a survivor retreat, but didn’t fit in because she was in a different place. I took that to heart. We lost her, but she is the one who inspired this retreat.”

A need to heal

Lifestyle expert and motivational speaker Krista Colvin of Camas is a breast cancer survivor. She was diagnosed in 2010 and underwent a double mastectomy, then breast reconstruction, after six months of chemotherapy. Allen Gabriel was her surgeon.

“Throughout my reconstruction process, Dr. Gabriel would share with me his vision and current activities of Pink Lemonade,” Colvin said. “He encouraged me to get involved once I was done with my treatment. Several breast cancer groups had reached out to me, however, I didn’t feel the same connection that I had with Pink Lemonade. I think it may be that this group is founded in Clark County, and the women involved had similar situations and communities.”

Colvin added that she valued the fact that her plastic surgeon saw a need for these patients that wasn’t being met, and took it upon himself to get the project off the ground.

“I had never stepped foot in a plastic surgeon’s office until I was diagnosed with cancer,” she said. “I was surprised to learn that he created the Pink Lemonade Project. He understands that reconstruction isn’t just about recreating a breast, that it includes the entire woman and her co-survivors. There’s so much to put back together.”

She and her husband, Michael, attended a couples retreat sponsored by the organization.

“It was incredibly well done and I appreciated that the weekend included group sessions with certified therapists with extensive ‘cancer patient’ experience.” Colvin said. “There was a great balance of sessions and time to recover and renew my relationship with my husband. I truly appreciate that the PLP includes our families, our co-survivors, and their need to heal as well.”

Sherry Stose of Ridgefield gets emotional when she talks about the organization.

“I was an operating room nurse at the time of my diagnosis and already knew Dr. Gabriel,” she said. “After my mastectomy and reconstruction, I was at a post-op appointment and he asked me if I was excited to go on the upcoming retreat. I didn’t think I needed to go, but went because he was so excited about it.”

Stose said the result was “life changing.”

“That retreat put me in such a wonderful place,” she said. “Before, I thought I had a pretty good handle on it, but this was life changing in an absolutely wonderful way. I don’t think I would be in this good a place if not for that.”

Currently, she serves as a Pink Link mentor. All mentors undergo thorough training, she added.

“This is not just a support group,” Stose said. “We look at survivorship as a positive thing, You can’t change what has happened in the past, but you can change what’s in the future.”

Chris Geraci, a former resident of Camas, is also a Pink Link mentor. She became involved in the Pink Lemonade Project after undergoing a double mastectomy and breast reconstruction. Gabriel was her plastic surgeon.

“He is so passionate about women and their rights,” she said. “You feel like a person first in his office, and a patient second.”

During her many appointments, Gabriel would talk about the Pink Lemonade Project.

“I ended up becoming a mentor for them and serving on their board,” she said. “There is so much information out there for patients to digest. All I remember hearing is, ‘You have cancer.’ Thankfully, I had a good support team in place, but many do not. I feel that if any good can come out of this, it will be sharing my story with others and helping them.”

Mary Unruh of Vancouver feels similarly. After having two different kinds of cancer, she underwent genetic testing to assess her risk of breast cancer. After the test determined she had an 86 percent chance of developing it, she decided to undergo a double mastectomy and hysterectomy.

“It made sense to me to do that,” she said. “I’d had cancer before, and didn’t want to go through the experience again.”

But Unruh faced unpleasant reactions from some family and friends, who she had assumed would support her decision.

“If I had someone who had been there to talk to during the process, it would have been so helpful,” she said.

That’s what motivated Unruh to become a mentor.

“If any part of my story helps people, that’s exciting,” she said. “It was certainly a different journey for me, and the support I received was different than someone who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. It helps to know that you are not alone in that struggle.”

Patient driven

Pink Lemonade is an organization that is patient driven, and Gabriel wants to see it remain that way.

“I never want to lose that patient voice,” he said. “That is why I am just one of nine votes on the board. I want the women affected by this to guide it, and we need to hear their voices.”

In addition to retreats, Pink Lemonade offers socials, an annual fundraising party, pink recycling carts (for a \$200 donation to Pink Lemonade), and a peer support program called Pink Link. The organization also created Breast Reconstruction Advocacy Victory Event (BRAVE) Day on March 21. It advocates that all women with new diagnoses of breast cancer deserve to know their rights to breast reconstruction as an integral part of treatment.

“We want to encourage all women to be fighters, know their rights, and be their own advocates,” Gabriel said.

There are only two part-time employees with the organization. All others, including the mentors, are volunteers. Gabriel stresses that all donations from the community go directly toward patient services and retreats.

Pink Lemonade has been the beneficiary of the Girls Night Out event in Camas for the past few years, as well as a recent “Pink Tea” at Columbia Ridge Senior Living in Washougal.

“We love that the community supports us,” Gabriel said. “We want the organization to continue to be patient and community run. There are a lot of programs we’d like to include, but need the support for it.”

Local Events

Help make a difference. Get involved in the Clark County community.

- College Goal Washington**
Thursday, October 18th - 5pm
- WSU Master Food Preserver Training**
Friday, October 19th - 8:30am
- Admissions 101**
Friday, October 19th - 2pm
- Learn about and “Grow your own!” Mushrooms!?!**
Saturday, October 20th - 10am
- Lung Cancer Research Foundation’s Free to Breathe Walk**
Saturday, October 20th - 10:30am

Photo Galleries



Danielle Frost

Post-Record staff writer

[Send an Email](#)

[Google Plus](#)

<p>SUBSCRIBER SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact Us Subscribe Vacation Stop Home Delivery Issues 	<p>HELP / SUBMISSIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send us a News Tip or Photo Send a Letter to the Editor Submit an Event Submit Feedback 	<p>ADVERTISE WITH US</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advertising Online Place an Ad
<p>RESOURCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Clubs and Organizations Jobs 	<p>MOST SEARCHED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obituaries Classifieds Find a Business 	<p>CONNECT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facebook Twitter RSS

CAMAS-WASHOUGAL
POST-RECORD

Search [Search](#)

f t

[Subscribe](#)

[Report Bug](#)