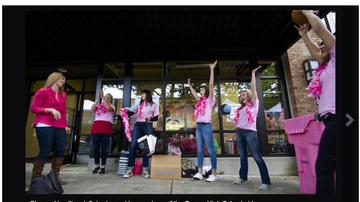
Keeping cancer survivors in the pink

Pink Lemonade Project's retreats, mentor programs aim to help with 'emotional piece of the healing process'



Shayna Hamilton, left, is cheered by members of the Camas High School girls basketball team after making a shot in to a pink recycling bin during the Downtown Camas Association's Girls' Night Out on Sept. 25. Some of the money raised at the fundraiser benefited the Pink Lemonade Project, a nonprofit that supports women with breast cancer.

By **Marissa Harshman**, Columbian Health Reporter
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Events

• Nov. 15: Pink Link pamper social, 2 to 5 p.m. at Divine Consign, 904 Main St., Vancouver. An afternoon of pampering. Reservations required. Contact Leslie Stose, leslie@pinklemonadeproject.org or 360-216-7333 ext. 1.

Upcoming fundraisers

• Oct. 11: Stamp Out Cancer, 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. at Salmon Creek United Methodist Church, 12217 N.E. Highway 99, Vancouver. Create five cards for $15, with $10 going toward Pink Lemonade Project and Pink Phoenix dragon boat team; $20 at the door. Register at stampingoutcancer.com.

• Oct. 16: A Pink Tea Party, 2 to 3:30 p.m. at Columbia Ridge Senior Living, 2300 W. Ninth St., Washougal. RSVP to Ashima, 360-335-1238, by Oct. 13. Cost is $10. All proceeds go to Pink Lemonade Project.

Ongoing

• Pink Lemonade Project Recycle Cart. Waste Connections customers can donate a minimum of $200 to receive a pink recycle cart. All proceeds go to Pink Lemonade Project. To order, visit www.pinklemonadeproject.org or call 360-216-7333.

Pink Lemonade Project

Programs

• Pink Link: A fellowship of breast cancer survivors and genetic "pre-vivors" offering one-on-one connections and group events.

• Retreats: Professionally led restorative retreats for breast cancer survivors and their partners.

• Lemon Drops: Providing women with discounted child care at licensed facilities while they undergo breast cancer treatment. Coming soon.

To learn more

• For more about Pink Lemonade Project programs, visit www.pinklemonadeproject.org or call 360-216-7333.

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Find more stories of courage, treatment and survival in the face of breast cancer at www.columbian.com/news/health/breast-cancer

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After years of providing care for breast cancer survivors, Dr. Allen Gabriel realized he wasn't equipped to handle a key component of their recovery.

Gabriel, a plastic surgeon at PeaceHealth Medical Group Plastic Surgery, could reconstruct their breasts after mastectomy surgery but he didn't know how to help heal the emotional scars.

"There's a lot of deep issues that I cannot address," Gabriel said.

He realized the community wasn't equipped to provide that support either.

"There wasn't an emotional piece of the healing process for women with breast cancer," Gabriel said.

So in 2010, Gabriel and his wife, Dr. Cassie Gabriel, a Vancouver anesthesiologist, founded the nonprofit Pink Lemonade Project. The goal was to educate and empower the women who were diagnosed with breast cancer and the families who support them through the cancer journey. The Gabriels turned to local patients for program ideas that would meet that mission.

In the four years since, the nonprofit has grown substantially, from a small organization offering a retreat for cancer survivors to one with several programs that support the whole family. The nonprofit established a board of directors and hired two staff — Kim Read, program and marketing director, and Leslie Stose, events and development director — to help shape the nonprofit and share the mission of Pink Lemonade.

"What we want is for them as breast cancer patients to be even stronger as an individual, as a woman, when they come out of this," Gabriel said.

Survivor retreats

The foundation of Pink Lemonade Project is the survivor retreats it has offered since 2010. The following year, the nonprofit expanded — at the request of patients — to offer couples retreats for breast cancer survivors and their partners. The retreats are designed to help survivors and their families move forward after active treatment.

To date, 125 people have gone through the retreats. By the end of the year, 160 will have attended.

The retreats are led by professionals — clinical social workers and psychologists — and take place over a weekend at the Menucha Retreat and Conference Center in Corbett, Ore.

Vancouver lawyer Cindy Horenstein, 53, went to a survivor retreat in November 2013, a month after her reconstruction surgery, at the urging of Allen Gabriel.

Horenstein went to the retreat looking for clarity. She firmly believes everything happens for a reason. She wanted to understand the reason for her cancer diagnosis.

"I was frustrated, resentful with what a thief cancer had been," Horenstein said.

"[The retreat] put the experience into context," she added.

For 48 hours, Horenstein focused on herself. She thought about her future, how she wanted her life to look. She had alone time, but also spent time with other survivors.

In one activity, Horenstein and the other women listed the awful things about cancer. Then, they listed the blessings. By the end of the discussion, they had identified more blessings, more opportunities than negatives.

"Which is exactly what I was hoping to get out of it," Horenstein said.

When Horenstein was diagnosed with breast cancer, she wasn't interested in forming a new social circle of survivors. She wanted to undergo her treatment and be done with everything related to cancer.

"But there's something really bonding about people with similar experiences," Horenstein said. "I met really great women through it."

"For me, it really filled a void," Horenstein said. "I don't even think I knew I had a void."

Pink Lemonade is looking to expand its retreat offerings once again. This fall, the nonprofit is hosting a new type of retreat, one for women who have yet to be diagnosed with breast cancer but have tested positive for a BRCA gene mutation. Those who test positive for the mutation have a higher incidence of breast and ovarian cancers.

Women who have tested positive for BRCA mutation often face different struggles than those diagnosed with cancer, Read said. They're fearful, they may have tough decisions to make regarding preventive surgeries and their family support usually varies, especially if they're choosing surgery, she said.

"They feel they don't fit into support groups because they're not actually diagnosed," Read said.

After the "pre-vivor" retreat, the nonprofit will talk with the participants and decide whether the new retreat should become a permanent addition.

Pink Link

About a year ago, Pink Lemonade Project launched a new program called Pink Link.

Pink Link is the nonprofit's mentor program that pairs breast cancer survivors with women who are newly diagnosed and going through treatment.

The nonprofit has 15 mentors, all of whom underwent an eight-hour training led by social workers and breast surgeons. The women don't advocate for certain drugs, treatments or hospitals and they don't give medical advice. Instead, they're trained to be active listeners, Read said.

Ridgefield resident Sherry Stose, 63, is one of the program's mentors. Sherry Stose, who is Leslie Stose's mother, was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2011. After her breast reconstruction, she told Gabriel that she would be happy to be a listening ear for other women going through the process.

When Pink Lemonade launched the Pink Link program, Sherry Stose was among the first group of women trained to be a mentor. She's connected with about a dozen women in the past year.

"They're looking for that personal connection with someone who has walked down that same road," she said.

While that road varies for each person, there's solace in knowing you have someone to talk to who has also received a breast cancer diagnosis, Sherry Stose said.

"It's a very lonely feeling when you get that diagnosis," she said.

When a woman requests a Pink Link mentor, Read matches her with a mentor who may have had a similar diagnosis, is close in age or underwent similar treatment. The pair usually talk three or four times — typically by phone or email — before the Pink Link connection ends, Read said.

The pairings are intentionally brief, Read said. The goal is to provide a listening ear and answer questions. They don't, however, want to create dependent relationships, Read said.

In its first year, Pink Link facilitated about 65 connections — more than one a week.

Lemon Drops

Beginning this fall, the nonprofit will launch another new program called Lemon Drops.

The Lemon Drops program offers women going through cancer treatment with vouchers for discounted child care at licensed facilities. The vouchers are for women to use while they're attending doctor appointments or chemotherapy or radiation treatments.

"We want to relieve that burden," Leslie Stose said.

Initially, the program will only be open to women in Vancouver. Eventually, though, Stose and Read would like to see it expand elsewhere in Clark County and Portland.

The idea for Lemon Drops came about through conversations with local providers. Stose and Read were regularly hearing from doctors that women were missing appointments because they didn't have child care.

"Which is really sad," Stose said, "because they're missing really important things."

Looking forward

All of the nonprofit's work is made possible by donations, grants and fundraisers, which make up the nonprofit's $145,000 annual operating budget, Stose said.

One of the more visible fundraisers is done by Waste Connections. For a minimum $200 donation, Waste Connections customers in Clark County can replace their household blue recycling bin with a pink bin.

"We're the only charity who has that in our area," Stose said.

Waste Connections donates the bins so all of the money goes *directly* to the nonprofit. So far, at least 250 bins have been distributed.

Several other local organizations host events and donate the proceeds to Pink Lemonade Project. Energy Events, for example, donates money from its annual Cosmo 7K races. The Downtown Camas Association's Girls' Night Out event benefits the nonprofit, as does Westfield Vancouver mall's Sip and Shop event.

Many local residents and businesses make regular donations to the nonprofit, as well.

This March, the nonprofit hosted its first big fundraiser, Pink Glow. The dinner and auction event raised $97,000 and will become the nonprofit's signature fundraising event.

Moving forward, Allen Gabriel hopes to see the community embrace the nonprofit and continue to support its mission. Like many nonprofit organizations, the future of Pink Lemonade is reliant on financial support from the community, Gabriel said.

Read and Leslie Stose are focusing their energy on the nonprofit's new programs and looking for ways to enhance the services they already offer in Clark County.

For survivors like Sherry Stose, that means local families will have the resources to help address the emotional trauma of a breast cancer diagnosis.

"That's what Pink Lemonade is about," she said, "helping women, couples and families get through the emotional injury."

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