Breast Cancer Survivors Take Journey to Wellness, Find Renewed Hope

Fay Matini, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at Cedars-Sinai last year, took the news calmly and kept her emotions at bay as she went through chemotherapy and radiation treatments and dealt with worried family and anxious friends.

Donna Sweikow also faced a breast cancer diagnosis at the medical center in 2013, and it shook her to the core, introducing fear and doubt into her normally sunny outlook on life.

For Matini and Sweikow, discovering Cedars-Sinai’s Journey to Wellness program during their treatment at the Saul and Joyce Brandman Breast Center — A Project of Women’s Guild at the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute brought tremendous relief. The free program, designed to help bring optimism back into patients’ lives, offers a team of clinicians.

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A Lasting Silver Lining

33 Years After Tragedy, Trauma Program Endures

When Los Angeles City Council President Herb Wesson paid a visit to Cedars-Sinai’s Share and Care program at Arlington Heights Elementary School recently, he felt a personal connection. Three decades ago, at a different school, Wesson was there as the program began.

Thanks to a conversation between Wesson’s mother and his young sons in the early 1980s, staff members at the Cedars-Sinai Department of Psychiatry organized a therapy session that has since grown into a citywide program.

“It started with a tragic incident more than 30 years ago at the school that my two sons were attending,” Wesson recalled. “One day, a father of one of the kids shot and killed the mother and the child, and the rest of the children at the school were having a lot of difficulty in trying to deal with it.”

At the time, Wesson’s mother, Gladys Wesson-Strickland, worked in Cedars-Sinai’s Department of Psychiatry. She shared her concerns about her grandchildren.

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and their schoolmates with Suzanne Silverstein, who was then a clinician in the department. Silverstein, now the founding director of Cedars-Sinai’s Psychological Trauma Center (PTC), assembled a crisis counseling team, which traveled to the school to help the children, parents and teachers process the tragedy.

“Right away, we could see that our kids were handling it better,” Wesson said. “What we know now is that we were seeing the start of one of the premier ways to go about helping traumatized children in this country.”

Soon after working at the Wesson children’s school, Silverstein and her colleagues helped at a campus where a child had been kidnapped from the school grounds. It quickly became clear to Silverstein that counseling and therapy for children struggling with stress and trauma deserved a permanent place in the local schools.

Share and Care, one of the specialized programs offered by the Psychological Trauma Center, uses art therapy to help children who are in emotional distress from causes such as bullying, divorce, death, gang activity, natural disasters and community violence. By drawing pictures, children can escape into their imaginations and use that creative energy to process the traumas they have experienced.

The program now operates in 29 schools throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District, where it logs 30,000 contacts per year with students, parents and teachers. Funding for the program comes from Cedars-Sinai, with help from a few outside sources. The Psychological Trauma Center also is eligible for donations from Cedars-Sinai’s Employee Giving program.

“This program has developed according to the needs of the schools and the needs of the kids and parents and teachers,” Silverstein said. “It is art therapy-based, and we work with kids who have experienced trauma or stressors that are keeping them from learning in the classroom.”

Teachers, school administrators and parents can refer children to the Psychological Trauma Center. The children are assessed by the school’s Share and Care counselor. The art therapy groups, held in private rooms with a maximum of eight children, meet weekly for 12 weeks and are led by the PTC counselor assigned to each participating school.

Zoe Jefferson, the principal at Arlington Heights Elementary School, had high praise for Share and Care.

“It’s one of the greatest programs, and that’s because of the people who are involved,” Jefferson said. “We’ve had relationships with other agencies in the past, but it was more on an outpatient basis. Having the counselor in the school a few days a week throughout the year makes an enormous difference.”

It’s not only the children who benefit. Recently, Jefferson asked Susan Hale, MFTI, the counselor assigned to her school, to sit in on a conference with a parent. “The parent was in denial about the matter we were discussing, and Susan, who is very compassionate and also firm, told the parent, ‘Your body language tells me that you’re uncomfortable,’” Jefferson said. “It didn’t work for that meeting, but at the next meeting, things were much better.”

Wesson takes great interest in the growth and success of the program.

“It’s an honor to go into Arlington Heights Elementary and to reconnect with the good works that started more than 30 years ago,” Wesson said. “I want to be available if they need my assistance. It’s personal — I will owe them as long as I live.”

From left: Deborah Kallick, Cedars-Sinai vice president of Government and Industry Relations; Suzanne Silverstein, MA, ATR, Psychological Trauma Center founding director; Herb Wesson, Los Angeles City Council president; Zoe Jefferson, principal, Arlington Heights Elementary; Susan Hale, MFT intern, Share and Care counselor; Ivijan Afrasiabi-Day, student intern, Cedars-Sinai Government and Industry Relations.
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who address physical, emotional and psychological concerns that result from diagnosis and treatment.

In the program’s stress-reduction class, Matini discovered her true feelings buried deep beneath the strong and stable surface she had maintained for many months. “I went into the room, and there were a bunch of us, all women who had just gone through the same thing, and it was like a burden was lifted from my shoulders,” she recalled.

As she went through a series of relaxation exercises with the group, Matini wept for the first time in almost a year. “Suddenly I was crying, just letting go in that room as I had never let myself do since my diagnosis. It felt so good to cry like that, to realize that for the first time I didn’t have to keep up any kind of a front, didn’t have to be strong for anyone, that I could just be me.”

For Sweikow, the program provided a path back to her naturally hopeful disposition. “I was somewhat drowning after my diagnosis with questions, fear and doubt,” she explained. “This program helped me change my perspective on living with breast cancer. I am so fortunate that my medical team was receptive to my needs and directed me to so many resources that have since given me direction and new hope.”

No one is more pleased to hear how Journey to Wellness makes a difference for cancer survivors than Sherry Goldman, NP. The nurse practitioner helped found the multidisciplinary program, whose participants meet each Tuesday afternoon at the Brandman Breast Center.

“Often at the end of cancer treatment you’re exhausted, and it can take a long time to get back your strength,” Goldman said. “You think, ‘Now what?’ And that’s what we’re addressing in Journey to Wellness. We give our patients a place to hang their hat, to come in and express themselves.”

The program also offers access to alternatives such as acupuncture and guided meditation.

“With Journey to Wellness, we’re looking at the whole person,” Goldman said. “We want to capture every area that has been affected by not just the cancer, but also the treatment.”

For more information about the Journey to Wellness program, call the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute at 310-423-8030.
South Korean immigrant Jihye Kim has found support at Korean Family American Services, which received a mental health grant from Cedars-Sinai.

Grant from Cedars-Sinai Lets Korean Immigrants Find Help and Hope

Jihye Kim left South Korea for a new life in Los Angeles five years ago with a baby on the way and big dreams for the future.

Nothing turned out as she expected. Kim was in her mid-20s, five months pregnant and unable to speak English when she and her husband moved into his father’s apartment in Koreatown. Her husband wasn’t able to get the stable employment they had counted on, and Kim found herself home alone much of the time while he worked part-time or looked for a job. She couldn’t drive and had no other family or friends here.

After their daughter was born, she felt even more isolated. She had no one to talk to about how exhausted and overwhelmed she was by the demands of being a new mother. She became increasingly depressed and anxious, and she turned to alcohol for relief.

Kim would eventually find her way to Korean Family American Services (known as KFAM) in Koreatown, one of 24 Los Angeles nonprofit organizations awarded two-year mental health grants by Cedars-Sinai in 2012. The grants have significantly expanded the reach and impact of organizations serving a broad spectrum of disadvantaged residents across L.A.—people like Kim who are able to turn their lives around once they receive the right kind of support.

Kim, who recently shared her story through an interpreter at the KFAM offices, said that for many months she put off seeking professional help because she didn’t think she could afford it, and she was ashamed to share her distress with strangers.

Waiting was no longer an option after July 12, 2012. On that day, her excessive drinking endangered her life. During an outing with her husband, she tried to run into a busy street. He held her and called 911, afraid he wouldn’t be able to keep her from harming herself. She awoke with a hangover the next day and no memory of the incident as her husband told her what had happened.

That moment was the turning point for Kim. She realized she was putting her child and her marriage—as well as her own life—at risk. She had seen an ad in the Yellow Pages about KFAM, which for three decades has provided free or low-cost counseling services for immigrant families and individuals. The ad led her to the organization, which gave her the reassurance that she was not alone. The connections she made with therapists and the treatment she received at no charge for substance abuse and depression made such a difference in her life that she is now determined to encourage others to set aside their shame and guilt so they, too, can find help—and hope for a better future.

“People are willing to go to the doctor if they have a cold, but in my culture, there is shame involved in seeing a therapist,” Kim said.

KFAM Director Connie Chung Joe, JD, said one of the organization’s biggest challenges is fighting the stigma that discourages people from seeking mental health services. Soon after receiving the Cedars-Sinai grant, KFAM was able to hold its first Korean Mental Health Screening Day, which brought together 28 Korean-speaking mental health professionals to screen participants for depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other conditions.

“Koreans are very prescribed, and there is a stigma attached to mental health,” said Chung Joe. “We want to change that by creating a safe, comfortable place to get help.”

With support from a grant from Cedars-Sinai, KFAM was able to offer free mental health services to more than 600 people through its 2013 Korean Mental Health Screening Day. The screening day included education, resources and a chance to ask a mental health professional questions.

“People always think of mental health in English-speaking communities, but it’s a crisis that affects everyone,” Chung Joe said. “We want to help the Korean community access mental health services.”

A Cedars-Sinai grant enabled KFAM Clinical Counseling Director Misook Nierodzik, MA, LMFT, and her team to do more outreach to a community that is reluctant to seek help.
One of the most significant impacts of the $1.6 million in mental health grants Cedars-Sinai awarded to 24 nonprofit organizations across Los Angeles in 2012 is that people who could not afford to wait — or to pay — for therapy are now receiving immediate attention.

The grants have helped organizations to shorten waiting lists, expand treatment options and intensify outreach efforts.

The people in greatest need include Latino immigrants who live in poverty in areas such as Pico-Union and Boyle Heights. They don’t speak English and have little or no access to mental health services. Clínica Oscar Romero and Amanecer Community Counseling Services are among the grant recipients that have been able to do more for the people in these communities.

For example, the grant from Cedars-Sinai enabled Clínica Romero to step up efforts to assist Latinos struggling with the effects of domestic violence, abandonment and the trauma of traveling to the United States without documentation. Many of the clinic’s patients are single mothers struggling with mental health issues that may put their children at risk.

“The Cedars-Sinai grant has allowed Clínica Romero to serve the uninsured population by providing sliding-scale fee services, including individual, couples, family and group therapy,” said Sandra Rossato, the clinic’s executive director. “Through hiring a licensed doctoral-level psychologist who supervises three mental health practicum students, we have been able to serve a higher number of individuals in need of mental health services in our community.”

Amanecer dedicated its grant to serving more women who have survived domestic violence or who suffer from postpartum depression.

“Most of the clients in our domestic violence program are impoverished, monolingual Spanish-speaking, new-immigrant women with children who are in desperate need of help but have no access to care,” said Amanecer’s Executive Director Tim Ryder.

“New moms often feel overwhelmed,” he said, “but when they’re further challenged by poverty, language barriers, unstable living conditions or family violence, depression can escalate to dangerous levels.”

The Cedars-Sinai funds helped Elena, a mother of two from Guatemala in her late 20s “who would never have engaged in mental health treatment without the outreach efforts afforded by the grant,” said Amanecer therapist Kathy Rojas, MSW.

Elena was suffering from severe postpartum depression and was having suicidal thoughts. She was afraid her illegal status would be discovered and her children would be taken away if she sought treatment. She had been living with domestic violence for years and was ashamed to talk about it.

“She was filled with rage and expressed concerns that she could hurt her children if her anger was not controlled,” Rojas said.

The Cedars-Sinai grant made it possible to use an evidence-based therapy approved nationally for post-traumatic stress disorder that other funding did not cover — and the treatment worked.

After going through therapy and taking parenting classes, Elena is building a new life. Family members have provided a safe home for her and her children. She has started a small business out of her home, she has become a mentor for other survivors of domestic violence, and she has applied for a U Visa for immigrants who are victims of crimes.

“The results,” Rojas said, “are amazing.”
Embracing Our Community

The BlueLIFE program offers a framework of tests and screenings, along with education and follow-up with advanced practice nurses.

They have made careers out of caring for the welfare of a city, and now the top commanders of the Los Angeles Police Department are entering into a partnership with Cedars-Sinai for a wellness program focusing on their own health and well-being.

Known as BlueLIFE, a reference to the iconic blue uniforms of the LAPD, the voluntary program began in January when a team of Cedars-Sinai nurses provided free health screenings for the approximately 120 members of the Command Officers Association. After the initial screenings, each participant will pursue an individualized health and wellness program.

“The initial focus of the BlueLIFE wellness program is on the LAPD commanders because it’s a contained sample,” said Kevin J. Jablonski, PhD, MPH, the LAPD’s chief police psychologist. “We can create a pilot program, develop the materials, look at the areas we’ll focus on, and as we enhance our knowledge and observe behavioral change, we can evaluate the efficacy of our interventions.”

At their initial health screenings, the command officers were tested for diagnostic information such as weight, blood pressure, blood lipid profiles, body mass index, blood glucose levels and percentage of body fat. Each participant would then meet privately with a Cedars-Sinai nurse to discuss the results.

“Though our employees often have fairly good knowledge about the health risks associated with certain behaviors and lifestyles, they may not be aware of how to change these behaviors,” Jablonski said. “The wellness program will provide that important missing step.”

Workplace wellness programs help motivate employees to take an active part in their own healthcare, said Logan Williams, associate director of Cedars-Sinai Community Health and Education. Williams is working with the LAPD on the program.

“The employees have health insurance, but they’re not going to the doctor for their annual checkups,” Williams said. “They are unaware of changes in their blood pressure or cholesterol levels or blood glucose.”

The wellness program offers an organized framework of tests and screenings, as well as an educational component. The follow-up with Cedars-Sinai advanced practice nurses to discuss test results is key to the success of the program.

The BlueLIFE wellness program, which is being funded by the members of the Command Officers Association, will run for two years. After its initial term, BlueLIFE will be evaluated based on whether it results in a reduction in medical claims, workers’ compensation claims and outpatient medical costs.

“Police officers face unique challenges,” Jablonski said. “There are prolonged periods of inactivity that are followed by the stressors of a Code 3 emergency like a rape or murder.”

Cmdr. Regina Scott knows all about those challenges. Now 54, Scott began her LAPD career 26 years ago as a patrol officer. The job comes with mental and physical challenges — the equipment belt a patrol officer carries can weigh more than 20 pounds, so the officer needs to wear it properly to avoid long-term health impacts.

When Scott was asked for a medical history during routine doctor visits, she didn’t know the answer to whether diabetes, cancer or heart disease was in her family. With BlueLIFE, Scott says, she has a chance for a fresh start.

“This is the perfect way to get educated about my health and take personal responsibility,” Scott said. “I’ll also be able to provide my two children with a good example.”
CPR Training Pays Off; Educator Becomes a Lifesaving ‘Angel’

Johnny Midgett doesn’t remember the critical moments when Janeth Bravo stepped in to help him at Virginia Road Elementary School on Jan. 15, but he will never forget what the Cedars-Sinai community health educator did for him that day.

Bravo, on campus to teach a weekly workshop on nutrition and fitness as part of Cedars-Sinai’s Healthy Habits program, was one of three people who saved Midgett’s life by performing CPR after the 41-year-old teacher’s aide collapsed on the school’s playground.

Midgett was in cardiac arrest, which often causes death if CPR or defibrillation doesn’t begin within minutes, said Gena Smith, RN, a Cedars-Sinai patient relations representative who has followed his recovery. “He was in ventricular fibrillation. It’s an abnormal, lethal rhythm. Janeth was one of the stars who saved his life by doing CPR. Without that, he would not be here.”

Bravo was on her way to a classroom when a school staff member who was clearly in distress approached her in the hallway and asked if she was a nurse. “No, but I’ve been trained in CPR,” Bravo said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

When told what had happened, Bravo ran to the playground. Midgett, a Virginia Road employee for nearly two decades, had been playing basketball with a group of fifth-graders during the lunch recess when he collapsed. David Patriz, a campus aide, and Lakeysha Hutton, a healthcare assistant, rushed to his side and took the first lifesaving steps. Patriz immediately began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while Hutton did chest compressions.

When Bravo reached them, she made sure someone had called 911, then offered to assist. Hutton was getting tired and asked Bravo to take over the compressions. Bravo and Patriz continued CPR until paramedics arrived.

Bravo was thrilled when she learned later that Midgett had survived and was expected to recover.

After several weeks of treatment at Cedars-Sinai, the Compton resident was discharged on Feb. 5 with an internal cardiac defibrillator implanted in his chest. The device detects cardiac arrhythmia and corrects it by delivering an electrical impulse to the heart.

On the day he was discharged from Cedars-Sinai, Midgett said he felt lucky to be alive. He had no idea before Jan. 15 that he was at risk for cardiac arrest.

“Everybody’s been calling me the miracle patient,” he said. “The people who did CPR are my angels. I am forever indebted to them and to everyone who has helped me. I couldn’t have asked for better care than I received at Cedars-Sinai.”

All Cedars-Sinai Healthy Habits educators are certified in CPR as part of their training to teach children and families in low-income neighborhoods how to lead healthier lives. Bravo happened to spend time brushing up on these skills just a couple of days before she was called upon to use them for the first time. She watched a CPR training video and felt good about refreshing her memory, although she wondered if she would be able to do the right thing in a real emergency.

Now she knows.

“At the moment I was giving compressions, I felt confident,” she said. “All I could think of was doing what I was supposed to do. I’m so glad I had the opportunity to take the CPR training and took the time to watch the video.”

So is Davita McCauley, principal of Virginia Road Elementary School. She gave Bravo a grateful hug when the paramedics relieved her.

“It was such a blessing that she was here,” McCauley said.
Ready for Disaster: YED Students Learn How to Help

Should a disaster strike, a newly graduated class of certified emergency responders from Cedars-Sinai’s Youth Employment and Development program will be ready to assist in the recovery.

Sixteen Fairfax High School seniors, who are in their final year of the two-year YED Health Careers Academy, successfully completed disaster preparedness training as part of the Community Emergency Response Team program.

The students attended a weekly three-hour class for six weeks, and passed a final exam. In the class, taught by a Los Angeles Fire Department member, the students learned skills such as basic first aid, how to suppress a small fire, evacuation tactics, search techniques, and the basics of communications during a disaster, including how to use radios.

“This is the second time we’ve included the disaster preparedness training, and both times it has been very popular,” said Andrea Perry, the YED’s program administrator. “These are students who all want to be health professionals, so this is something they can take into their communities right away.”

Alexander Ureño, a 17-year-old senior at Fairfax High, said that thanks to the CERT training, he will know what to do in event of an emergency. “The CERT training is a great part of the program,” said Ureño, who wants to do research in the field of kidney transplants. “Now I feel fully prepared for when a disaster like an earthquake hits.”