



## Wellness Center tackles emotional side of cancer

By Kristen Schoenebeck

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Salem - Cancer touches just about everyone at some point, but there is no reason to go it alone. So says the Wellness Community, a national organization with a local branch in Salem for cancer patients and their caregivers, which offers a wide range of activities and support groups free of charge.

Last month, Valerie Rosenberg, a local chef and artist who availed herself of the Wellness Community's programs after her cancer diagnosis, thought it was time to return the favor. She hosted a "Chocolate Therapy Night," inviting patients and their caregivers to create chocolate truffles, which they sampled and took home in take-out containers donated by a local Chinese restaurant.

The Wellness Community established its Salem satellite branch about 18 months ago and has been in full swing for about 13 months now. This branch grew out of support groups that had been held at Penny Wigglesworth's Marblehead home, which also houses the all-volunteer, non-profit Marblehead Penny Bear Company, which donates customized teddy bears, free of charge, to a number of causes worldwide. Wigglesworth began the cancer support group in her home after volunteering for hospice and being touched by a young patient nearly 14 years ago.

Wigglesworth is "a wonderful woman who deserves all kinds of credit," said Jodi LaPointe, outreach and marketing coordinator for the Wellness Community. TWC serves the entire North Shore and beyond, with some people traveling from as far as an hour away, since the next closest Wellness Community is in Newton.

"Salem's really the 'belly-button' of the North Shore," LaPointe said. "We've got a lot of people coming from Swampscott and Marblehead, but we also have people traveling down from Gloucester and from as far as Winchester. It's a great, central location."

Located on the second floor at 76 Lafayette St. in Salem, the local branch is called "Sue's Circle of Hope," named for Swampscott's Sue DeVries, who was so instrumental in pushing for the opening of a Wellness Community in this area.

DeVries, who died in April 2006 from breast cancer, "was very instrumental in being part of the North Shore Community, and it was important to her that there was a place on the North Shore where people could go when they had received this diagnosis," LaPointe said. Local companies and fundraisers support the non-profit organization. LaPointe said she has been overwhelmed and overjoyed by the "outpouring of support from the local community."

She noted that, although this area offers top-notch medical cancer treatment, "There's such a need for the emotional side of cancer to be touched on -- there are social and emotional aspects that need to be

addressed in every situation."

LaPointe added that it's therapeutic for patients to "come together and be very honest with what they're going through. Here, the Wellness Community offers meditation, yoga, movement class and a 'core' class, which is a movement-oriented class that combines Pilates, yoga and tai chi with a little jazz thrown in," she said, laughing.

'You will not be alone'

The cornerstone of the Community is that, whatever stage of cancer you're dealing with, from diagnosis to chemotherapy, as a patient or as a caregiver, you will not be alone.

"It's important to go through these things together, and being a participant in your own recovery is very healing and very powerful," LaPointe said. "There's truly a sense of community here, and it's important to be in a supportive environment. People here understand. It's important to find other people in your situation, and it's great to see the growth over the past year. We have many participants who have been full cycle, from their diagnosis through their treatment, and they offer hope to others."

Program Director Jerry Schwartz, a hospice counselor with a Ph.D. in psychology, said, "I helped to take care of Sue DeVries at the end of her life, and what she had hoped for happened with the center. She really got it going, which is why the name, 'Sue's Circle of Hope' is so fitting."

Schwartz emphasized the importance of caregiver support services offered at TWC.

"Caregivers are in it for the long haul, and there aren't a lot of supports out there for them," he explained. "I want people to know that our programs are there to support family members and other caregivers, and I would like to see more caregivers take advantage of our supports."

"Connection" seems to be the byword for the center; whether dealing with a cancer diagnosis or taking care of a loved one who is doing so, "it's about having a common, shared experience with each other that offers reassurance and guidance" through the difficult times, Schwartz said.

Schwartz said the center has grown tremendously over the past year, enjoying referrals from Boston hospitals, the North Shore medical community and, most importantly, by word of mouth. Although most of the services take place in group settings, Schwartz pointed out that some individual therapy is offered on a short-term basis.

As program director, Schwartz noted that it's not always all about cancer at the Wellness Community. This month's chocolate-therapy night, for example, was decidedly "cancer-free." Those diagnosed with the disease often find coping with it a full-time job. Between appointments with a team of doctors and dealing with day-to-day difficulties, it can be therapeutic to have a "no shop-talk" rule occasionally, Schwartz said.

"People with cancer who come in here often talk about finding ways to take a day off from thinking about cancer," he said. "It's all-consuming."

Schwartz was thankful for Rosenberg's program for just that reason.

"There was a lot of laughing that night," he said. "Valerie was a participant in our program, and she had the idea to have this chocolate-therapy night, and she made it happen. Those times can be just as healing

as our other services."

LaPointe emphasized the importance of taking an active role in recovery.

"The more you take part in your recovery, the more enabled you are to heal, whether it's through meditation, yoga or through support groups. People come s through the door - and it takes so much courage to walk through that door -- but that in itself is healing. They're healing from isolation, potential change of jobs or change of friends, and there's a lot to deal with."

LaPointe would know. Eight years ago, her husband was diagnosed with a rare form of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Because he was resistant to chemotherapy, the medical team opted for a stem-cell transplant. While the doctors were treating her husband, LaPointe was herself diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. She said she hopes to provide hope for others battling this disease.

She said, "We are and were raising three children who have moved through our journey courageously. Both my husband and I received wonderful care at MGH and are both living survivors of a very challenging year. So, my interest in giving hope to others comes from the heart."

All programs are free of charge, LaPointe said, "because the last thing you need to be worrying about is how you're going to afford this."

LaPointe was grateful for the support from a number of public and private organizations. The Sue DeVries Cancer Foundation has been very supportive, she said. She also mentioned the Yoga Loft in Marblehead, which offers free Monday-night session, at which they solicit optional donations, which are donated to the Wellness Community. "They've been doing that for over a year now, which is so kind and generous. We've had a wonderful outpouring of support everywhere."

One particularly touching donation came from 13-year-old Jake Varsano of Marblehead, who for the second year in a row arranged a tennis tournament at his home this past July to raise funds for "Sue's Circle of Hope." Varsano, who is friendly with DeVries' daughter Haley, raised \$800 this past summer for the cause when turnout was even better than he expected. He said he might hold the fundraiser again:

"We had mixed doubles with kids in my grade," he said. "It's great to help out."  
FYI

Classes for parents with cancer are on The Wellness Community's agenda for this coming November, according to Program Director Jerry Schwartz.

"We can't get the word out enough to encourage people to call or go on the web and look us up," he said. "I invite people to come in and see us and see what we're about and if there's any way we can be of some kind of support."

For more information, call The Wellness Center at 978-745-0541 or visit [wellnesscommunity.org](http://wellnesscommunity.org). You can also e-mail Schwartz at [jschwartz@wellnesscommunity.org](mailto:jschwartz@wellnesscommunity.org).