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## Hope and healing

### Breast and GYN Health Project marks 20th year of helping local people facing cancer

By Heather Shelton, [hshelton@times-standard.com](mailto:hshelton@times-standard.com), [@ETSLifestyles](#) on Twitter

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The Breast and GYN Health Project has helped over 2,800 clients facing breast or gynecologic cancer concerns since opening its doors 20 years ago.

“I feel honored to be part of an organization that makes a profound difference in the lives of local people facing cancer,” said Rose Gale-Zoellick, executive director of the Arcata-based, nonprofit organization.

“Each person’s needs are different and their cancer experiences are unique,” she said. “Cancer can be overwhelming. I feel so fortunate that we have a local place in our community for people to get support, information and a resource to help them make the best decisions they can on their cancer journey.”

The organization — originally called the Humboldt Community Breast Health Project — began in June 1997 because of one woman’s experience with breast cancer. Dr. Julie Ohnemus had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of the disease at age 35. She had treatment locally, but needed specialized care in the Bay Area. There, she learned about the Palo Alto Community Breast Health Project, created by Dr. Ellen Mahoney and a group of breast survivors.

When she walked into the Palo Alto center, Ohnemus found exactly what she needed — compassionate understanding and hope provided by meeting other women who had survived cancer. She also found information

she had been unable to find, even as a physician, Gale-Zoellick said.

“She knew that other women facing breast cancer in rural Humboldt County needed and deserved the type of support she had found in Palo Alto,” Gale-Zoellick said.

The Humboldt Community Breast Health Project was born after a group of breast cancer survivors gathered around Ohnemus’ kitchen table and agreed they wanted to make the doctor’s vision for a local breast cancer resource center a reality.

“The Project started with resources Dr. Julie Ohnemus had in a milk crate at her office at North Country Clinic in Arcata,” Gale-Zoellick said. “She had been part of a group that called themselves A.W.E, the Amazon Warriors Extraordinaire. The support group had moved from place to place, and began holding meetings at North Country Clinic. Once it grew from a support group to be a service organization, it had its first office in a windowless room at the Jacoby Storehouse, then it moved into a house across from Arcata Safeway and, finally, to the warm, friendly house it resides in today near the Arcata Co-op.”

The Project — which initially focused on breast cancer — started assisting people with gynecologic cancer in 2004. In 2014, the organization’s name was changed from Humboldt Community Breast Health Project to the Breast and GYN Health Project to reflect its broadened mission.

Ohnemus says it is “awe-inspiring” to see the local community be so supportive of the Breast and GYN Health Project.

“The ability to reframe crisis into opportunity and creativity speaks to the power of the human spirit and the desire for wholeness,” Ohnemus said. “So many women and men have walked through our doors, and each have left their heart print with their authenticity and story. I have deep gratitude for them and all our staff, volunteers and supporters over our 20 years.”

While the core purpose of the organization has remained the same, the center has seen some changes through the years.

“Although breast and gynecologic cancer treatments have changed a lot over the past 20 years, the impact of a cancer diagnosis has not really changed,” Gale-Zoellick said. “There is still a lot of fear and uncertainty that comes with a cancer diagnosis. Cancer usually means a big turn in the paths

of people's lives. Most of BGHP's volunteers and staff really understand the cancer experience because they are cancer survivors themselves or they have cared for people with cancer. The importance of this 'peer support' is still at the heart of how BGHP provides its services."

Last year, the Breast and GYN Health Project served 432 clients who had breast or gynecologic cancer or cancer concerns, Gale-Zoellick said. Services these days are many, ranging from compassionate phone support from "Warmline" volunteers to medical visit preparation or decision support consultations with a nurse or physician.

"This is a process by which trained HCBHP volunteers and staff assist clients in organizing their health questions and concerns prior to meeting with their doctor for a consultation," said Brenda Elvine-Kreis, client services coordinator.

"The planning session takes approximately 1½ to 2 hours and is free," she said. "After a plan is developed and approved by the client, a copy will be faxed to the practitioner prior to the scheduled appointment ... The goal of consultation planning is to improve the use of valuable practitioner time by allowing the practitioner a 'preview' of the client's questions and concerns."

The Breast and GYN Health Project also offers assistance finding information or resources, a lending library and more. All services are free of charge.

"As a grassroots organization, the majority of our funding comes directly from our local community — roughly 75 percent comes from individual donors and fundraising events, with only 25 percent coming from grants," Gale-Zoellick said. "None of our services are covered by insurance. We do not receive funding from ACS Relay for Life and are not eligible for funding from the Avon or Komen foundations."

Also free are the myriad support groups offered by the Breast and GYN Health Project. These groups include the Advanced Disease Support Group, Arcata Breast Cancer Support Group, a Garberville support group, the Expressive Writers Group, Gynecologic Cancer Support Group and the Young Women's Support Group, facilitated by Elvine-Kreis, who is also a breast cancer survivor.

"I was 39 years old when I was diagnosed with Invasive Ductal Carcinoma — aka, breast cancer," said Elvine-Kreis, who was living in Sacramento at the time.

"Having had the incredibly overwhelming experience of receiving an unexpected diagnosis," she said, "followed by the subsequent difficult decision-making process, as well as feeling frustrated with the lack of support and guidance I received at the time of diagnosis and throughout my treatment, I became very passionate about the importance of patient navigation services as an important component of cancer care."

Elvine-Kreis began working for the Breast and GYN Health Project in November 2010 after moving to Humboldt County with her husband and young daughter.

"I feel very strongly that the support services offered by BGHP can empower people with knowledge, resources and understanding so that they are better equipped to cope with their diagnosis," she said.

As part of her job, she facilitates the Young Women's Support Group.

"Breast cancer is rare in young women," Elvine-Kreis said. "Fewer than 5 percent of all breast cancers diagnosed in the U.S. occur in women under 40 years old. A breast cancer diagnosis can be very shocking for young women at an age when serious health issues are relatively uncommon. At a time in life most often focused on family and career, issues of treatment, recovery and survivorship suddenly take top priority. As a result, BGHP offers a support group specifically for women who have been diagnosed with a breast or GYN cancer prior to age 50. This group meets twice a month to connect with one another, pursue topics of special interest and to periodically participate together in designated activities outside of BGHP."

Elvine-Kreis says she's found it "incredibly healing, fulfilling and inspiring" to be involved in a program that helps so many people with cancer.

"Cancer has a way of stripping people down to their authentic selves," she said. "Working as the client services coordinator, I have had the privilege to witness people's initial despair and vulnerability at their initial diagnosis, followed by a surge of power, strength and wisdom that drives them to get through difficult treatments and beyond ... My heart is full because of the incredible people at BGHP who I have had the privilege to meet and learn from while witnessing their healing path."

Felicia Oldfather initially came to the Project as a client facing a second bout of melanoma on her labia. She is now one of the volunteers who help make the Breast and GYN Health Project a success.

“At the suggestion of a local doctor, I sought out the Breast Project for support and joined (the) gynecological cancer support group, aka the Gyn Girls,” Oldfather said. “... When it recurred again in 2010, I had a group already where I could say anything.”

A few years ago, Rebecca Zettler, facilitator of the support group, suggested Oldfather become a “Warmline” volunteer.

“As a Warmliner, I spend about four hours a week at the Breast and GYN Health Project,” Oldfather said. “We deal with concerns of folks who come in (and) answer the phone, but our real job is to keep in touch with a group of women who have cancer or are investigating something that might be cancer or want help in supporting a person close to them who has cancer.”

She added: “We have no formula, but respond to the person we speak with and their situation. A women might want information, might want understanding, maybe a shoulder to cry on. She might want to find a ‘buddy’ who has had a similar situation to talk with or to have a consult with our staff about medical options. Sometimes, a more personal connection is made. I think of a woman I visited in the chemotherapy unit at St. Joe’s. The idea of the word ‘Warmliner’ is that it is a warm phone line of connection.”

For more information about the Breast and GYN Health Project, call 707-825-8345, go to <http://www.bgphp.org> or stop by the office at 987 Eighth St. in Arcata. Drop-in hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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