

Our Look for Success

Cynthia Ulreich, RN, OCN

cyndylou816@yahoo.com

I watched a forty-two year old breast cancer victim cry as the doctors told her the disease had taken over her lungs and we were now helpless to fight it. I saw a very beautiful woman, close to my own age; mourn a life filled with joy and happiness. She was the kind of lady who always had her make-up done and her hair done up just right. To be honest, I admired her style. That day, her minister and his wife came to see her. She was a very proud lady and had been crying most of the afternoon. I intercepted the two and asked that they let me make sure she was dressed before they went into her room. I went in to help her dry her tears. When I told her she had visitors, it was not her tears she was worried about and she reached for her wig and mascara. Her actions took me by surprise. She went home with hospice care a few days later and I never saw her again. My very beautiful, very proud patient taught me something I had never realized working with oncology patients, as sick as they are, as close to death as they may be, appearance matters.

A few weeks later, I traveled home to the funeral of a close family friend. My mother wanted to get her hair styled for the sad occasion. Since I was staying with her, I tagged along. Seeing Sharon, who had styled my own hair for seventeen years of my life, brought back the memory of that day I saw my patient fixing her hair to see her pastor, someone who would love her no matter what happened. I realized for the first time I could help. We had very few resources at Henry Ford Hospital where I am an Oncology certified nurse to assist our patients with “vanity” issues as I like to call them. I felt

suddenly that I had been holistically taking care of patients to the best of my ability, forgetting they had lives other than when our paths crossed. I had an idea.

I started doing research on oncology patients asking the clientele what was important and what made cancer and chemotherapy so difficult for them. Besides the indisputable life and death issues, many remarked on alopecia and very pale skin tones. I investigated ways to obtain wigs and toupees, turbans and other assorted headwear. I talked to our oncology social workers and case managers to see what resources they could offer. I found there were plenty of services willing to help my patients. To my horror, many also had very large price tags. Being a staff nurse, I did not readily have the resources available to initiate these programs.

As I kept looking for more options, I stumbled upon a lady, Karlene Goedde, the head of 'The Look for Success' program in Detroit. I talked with her at great length about the program and saw a perfect fit for our patients. Her program started by her daughter in Florida for unwed, underprivileged mothers to gain the confidence required for job seeking, had been altered in Michigan to accommodate cancer victims. It was a special goal, giving patients makeovers to help them adapt to their new look, showing them how to fix their hair, and colors they should use to match their new tones. In my heart, I felt this was a very special program, something necessary to build the self esteem of my patients facing sadness everyday.

I approached my nurse manager, Audrey with my ideas. Her words will forever ring in my heart. "Whatever you need Kiddo, let's do it." We sought the approval of our directors assuring there was no conflict of interest for our patients. We met no resistance. I contacted Karlene and we made a date.

The day started out well enough. The case manager from the radiation oncology department Amy had arranged for several snack trays and beverages to be delivered. We set our flowers and put on some upbeat easy listening music attempting to replicate a day spa. Sue, our nurse educator, had brought in her camera to take before and after pictures. Karlene and a crew of volunteer makeup artists arrived and we set up shop. We were all set. I was nervous and hopeful, the patients would respond positively to our attempts to bring a little joy in their lives. I had no idea how successful it would turn out! All we needed now were patients.

I remember when Amy brought in our first lady. She sat smiling. Sue took her picture with me and the day suddenly sped into overdrive. I rounded up patients staying on the unit at the time and Amy brought ladies up from radiation. Ellen, a case manager in the chemotherapy clinic brought ladies down to our spa for makeovers. I watched with tears in my eyes as these fatigued ladies, who hours earlier had been so downhearted, smiled, talking to other cancer patients, and laughingly telling their stories as if it was all in a day's work. They related fondly to each other and the wonderful people making each of them look so beautiful. One lovely little lady walked up to another who was very depressed and remarked how breathtaking she looked. When the sad lady started to cry, we had to refresh her make-up, but no one cared. Those were happy tears. The best part was when she realized, unbeknownst to her, her daughter stood watching at the door with a heart filled with hope. Another lady asked as I walked her back to her room, "Do you think my nurse will recognize me?" In my wildest dreams, I never imagined the day turning out so gloriously. I do believe, however, my favorite part of the day was when a 25 year-old leukemia patient had received her makeover with her sister by her side.

looked to me and said the words that made my heart explode, "You know, I don't feel sick anymore."

The program was more than I could have ever hoped. We made over twenty-five ladies that day from the three oncology departments within the main campus of our system. I remember each and every lady. Karlene gave them each a make-up bag filled with items donated by large cosmetic companies. In fact, everything had been donated, including parking passes for our make-up artists. Total gain from our project, 25+ happy souls, total cost to our facility \$0. Karlene and crew are coming back each quarter to keep our project alive as the seasonal colors change. I hope to continue adding to our project, hopefully adding hairdressers and a "hair prosthesis" supplier. For now, I am happy knowing for at least one day, I helped change the essence of the souls of twenty-five beautiful, courageous women.