



Barbara McCray, Forge Volunteer

Forge Breast Cancer Survivorship Program: *St. Vincent's Foundation leads unprecedented community collaboration*

THE TEAM

Community leaders from Brookwood Baptist, UAB Medicine, UAB School of Nursing, Grandview, and St. Vincent's Health System call the Forge breast cancer survivorship support center collaboration something remarkable in our community.

The effort, conceived by the Women's Breast Health Fund (WBHF) of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, is overseen by leaders from all four Birmingham-area regional health systems. Representatives from those otherwise-competing health systems are now regularly gathering in friendly meetings centered on bringing Forge to fruition.

"It's really phenomenal," says WBHF Director Madeline Harris, RN, MSN, OCN. Harris, a former oncology nurse, initially served as the fund's volunteer chair.

"I can't imagine anything more exciting than to see all the health systems working together, with the patient at the center of their efforts."

THE PROCESS

Those efforts were made possible in 2009, when an unnamed donor made a large gift to the Community Foundation to fund supportive care services for breast cancer survivors and their loved ones. Grants would be awarded to nonprofits that collaborated to provide services. A key stipulation was that the WBHF create a collaboration surpassing anything one medical center might do alone.

The donor recognized the medical community had strived to provide the right kind of treatment for breast cancer survivors. But who was taking care of the person after they're diagnosed, or even years later, as they learn to live with being a cancer survivor? No one was looking at how a survivor's life is changed after that, and no one was supporting their loved ones.

THE RESULTS

There's something soothing about Barbara McCray's voice at the other end of a phone. Perhaps her calming countenance was forged through trials. This devout Catholic and mother of a special needs son is a 10-year breast cancer survivor. McCray fought that battle while caring for her mother, then suffering from dementia.

Although McCray speaks words of peace, her real gift is empathetic listening. That's why this faithful volunteer was one of the first recruited.

Forge is unlike any medical/mental health care program in the country. Headquartered for now at St. Vincent's Foundation, Forge currently offers a 24/7 phone-based support system for survivors, with more services to come.

"Sometimes they don't know what they need," Rebecca Di Piazza, Forge's project manager, says of survivors. "They are so overwhelmed, because they were just diagnosed. Or, they're going through treatment and they're trying to make it day by day."

Forge learned through a community needs assessment that survivors are most likely to ask other survivors for help. Those without financial resources may need transportation. Others need someone to take notes at appointments. Some need help finding a health system's services, from counseling to nutrition.

"So the first stage of our plan is a 24/7 phone support line," says Di Piazza.

That's where McCray and other volunteers come in. Some callers just need to talk. Others need information. Those who answer the phones serve as non-medical mentors, connecting women to professionals and each other.

THE FOUNDATION'S ROLE

St. Vincent's Foundation has served as Forge's home since its inception. As other Forge services follow, including rural support groups and wellness services, Susan Sellers, St. Vincent's Foundation president, will help the organization transition to its own nonprofit organization. She says the Foundation is uniquely positioned to help fulfill the donor's vision of this program.

"At St. Vincent's, we treat mind, body, and spirit, and we've always been a community partner. From the beginning, St. Vincent's looked at Forge as an opportunity to level the playing field for those most vulnerable patients who don't have the resources to battle this disease.

"That's very much in keeping with St. Vincent's. It's who we are. It's what we do."

Support for the Forge Breast Cancer Survivor Center comes from The Women's Breast Health Fund of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham as part of an effort to improve the quality of life for women who are breast cancer survivors as well as their loved ones.



Blessing of hands at Forge volunteer training

"They are so overwhelmed, because they were just diagnosed. Or, they're going through treatment and they're trying to make it day by day."

How You Can Help

Help us get the word out! Post the Forge Breast Cancer Survivorship Program 24/7 telephone support line (1-800-811-8925) on social media and on bulletin boards in your church, community center, library, or other public places. Help us help others.