



After a 30- year career in advertising, Pattie Cagney Sheehan decided to take a different path in life: she founded a business that provides post- surgery support to people who've had breast cancer.

Cancer had already visited Sheehan's life and irrevocably changed it. Sheehan's father died from pancreatic cancer in his 50s and her mother passed away from ovarian cancer in her 80s. As her mother underwent chemotherapy and wanted to purchase a wig, Sheehan decided there were not enough resources to help her and others.

"I'd watched her struggle to maintain her dignity, never losing her sense of self or her sense of humor, and all the while reaching out to others as they joined the club (of those diagnosed)," Sheehan says. "When she died in June 2007 I realized what I needed to do for my second act."

Sheehan's next step was to found a Chicago boutique — appropriately dubbed Second Act — that provides mastectomy products and wigs.

Awareness month

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month and, while there have been advances in treatment, the illness continues to affect millions of Americans a year. The National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc. estimates that one in eight American women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetimes.

According to Susan G. Komen, rates begin to increase after age 40 and are highest in women over age 70. It is one of the most common cancers women face, second only to skin cancers.

While all cancers are serious, Sheehan says breast cancer has impacts that others do not. "With other cancers, you may go through surgery or chemotherapy but they don't leave you with a physical deficit the way breast cancer does," she says.

"Breast cancer leaves you with a missing body part. What do you do if you have your breast removed?" Sheehan says most people who receive a breast cancer diagnosis are understandably eager to get it removed as soon as possible through a full or partial removal of one or both of their breasts.

At that moment, few people think about what happens after surgery. "What they don't think about is, 'What am I going to do when this is over?'" she says.

Mastectomy fitters

While implants are an option, Sheehan notes they aren't for everyone and have downsides. Some people can't tolerate implants, some require multiple surgeries to place them, and some people simply don't want them.

Sheehan's boutique specializes in providing alternatives to implants, and has a highly trained staff to educate and help their customers.

As a certified mastectomy fitter, Sheehan is specially educated and trained in the provision of breast prostheses and post- mastectomy services.

"The fact is you can do a breast prostheses in a pocketed bra that makes you look perfectly normal and does not require additional surgery," says Sheehan who notes that most prostheses, except for custom- made ones, are covered by insurance.

The boutique offers a wide range of products including prostheses filled with Silicone gel or fiber, along with tank tops, swimsuits, compression garments for lymphedema, and a range of synthetic wigs that are comfortable and easy to care for.



Wellness House

While Second Act is one place where people can find support and resources following a cancer diagnosis or a mastectomy, another great resource is Wellness House, a non- profit located in Hinsdale that provides free psycho- social services, including individual and group support to people living with cancer.

Tracy Lester, director of programs, says the programs and services offered by the 30-year-old organization have evolved with medical advances and research that helps people prevent or cope with cancer.

"People are living longer with a cancer diagnosis, particularly those women who are diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer so that is one thing that's definitely changed," Lester says. "Thankfully, due to medical advances, women can live many, many years with a metastatic diagnosis or live cancer free with an early stage diagnosis."

Still, patients may suffer physical side effects from their surgery or treatment or face a financial burden from their medical treatment. The Wellness House offers individual and group counseling to help people through such challenges.

Free classes

Nutrition and exercise are two more areas of focus for Wellness House. The organization offers 60 free exercise and movement classes a week, three of which are specific to breast cancer.

"We know that when our participants and cancer patients are able to exercise during their treatment and for the rest of their lives they are able to better manage their symptoms," Lester says. "They are also able to reduce the risk of a reoccurrence."

With the shutdowns imposed by COVID-19, the programs and classes offered by Wellness House went online and participation has increased.

Lester reports that over the last five years, Wellness House had an average yearly increase of 8% in participant visits to programs.

In the first six months of offering 100% online programs, from March 16 through Sept. 16, they experienced a 35% increase in participant visits compared to the same time last year.

Expand the reach

Lester says online programming is helping them to reach patients they previously hadn't, in locations or neighborhoods where health services may be lacking.

"Because we're doing it in the online space we don't have any boundaries of geography," she says. "We can really get out there and support people in a much bigger way now."

Whether looking for a wig or prostheses, individual counseling or group support or a nutrition or meditation class, Lester says there is help out there for breast cancer patients.

"I'd suggest that patients try to connect with their physician, patient navigator or social worker who can help them find these resources," she says.

For Sheehan and Lester alike, the benefit of the work they do is seeing people embrace life and gain confidence and joy despite cancer.

"Second Act helps individuals facing physical changes retain their self-esteem, regain their self-image and thrive," Sheehan says.

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