

Healing Together!

Learning How to Walk Again, p. 3 | Jan and Merv Szalaj



Wellness News

Dear Friends,

For 30 years, Wellness House has been inspired by the determination and resilience of our participants. During this time, our programs have educated, supported and empowered more than 42,000 people who have turned to us during times of fear, isolation, and the unknown that comes with a cancer diagnosis. Today is no exception, and in fact, the need for Wellness House programs is even greater. As our world struggles with the new realities of social distancing, people diagnosed with cancer report an increase in stress, isolation and new life challenges. Our commitment to our mission and the people we serve has never been stronger.

Wellness House entered a new era on March 16 by providing all programs online. In the first 6 weeks of online programs, nearly 800 people made over 6,000 visits. Active and engaged participation confirmed what we had suspected, people need support now more than ever. In this newsletter, Jan Szalaj shares her experience of life after a brain cancer diagnosis, surgery and chemotherapy. She tells of the incredible journey she took to relearn basic life skills following treatment. Wellness House was here to help Jan build her strength through in-person exercise classes and continues to be here with online classes Jan can participate in from the safety of her home during the pandemic.

Quick action and changes that led to the success of our online programming will be followed by creative changes to the annual Walk for Wellness House. Because the health and safety of our community are our top priority, this year's Walk for Wellness House will be a "virtual" event. **The Virtual Walk for Wellness House will take place on June 28, 2020.** We will still gather, but in our own spaces. We will still build community, just like our participants are doing in online programs. We will still honor those affected by cancer and inspire a greater commitment to the future. Most importantly, support of the Walk means people affected by cancer will #NeverWalkAlone. One of our early leaders, Bill Walker, recalls the uncertainty experienced leading up to our first walk, a time when there were no cell phones, no registration system and no way to know who would come out for it, *"The sound of voices, wheels turning on wagons and skates, and plodding of feet seemed to come from everywhere at once - one of those magical moments for Wellness House"*

This year, we boldly embark on a new journey with our online programs and a new way to walk. We feel deep gratitude for your continued support as we navigate these challenging times with hope, resolve and adaptability. We're excited to walk with you and invite you to join us for an inspiring day of community, hope and shared purpose. Sign up or learn more about Virtual Walk for Wellness House at walk.wellnesshouse.org.

With determination and resilience,



Lisa K. Kolavennu, MA, LCPC
Executive Director



Robert C. Knuepfer III
Board Chair

Learning How to Walk Again

The winding road to a new normal.

Jan and Merv Szalaj

In the fall of 2015, Jan Szalaj wasn't feeling like herself. She was crying all the time and couldn't understand her own emotions. She had been seeing a counselor for a little while, but as it turns out, what was going on in her brain was more than psychological. After going to Hinsdale Hospital at the recommendation of her counselor, Jan was diagnosed with brain cancer.

The doctors had Jan start an aggressive form of chemo right away. But after suffering a chemo-related heart attack in December of 2015, they stopped the treatment. Jan spent the next few months in physical therapy to prepare her body for the next step of treatment—brain surgery.

All of this was recalled by Jan's husband, Merv, as her own memory from this time is a blur. "She did not remember who I was," Merv said. "It was hard dealing with her. I closed all the doors and windows. Locked everything up. I was afraid she was going to run out during the night or something."

After terminating the chemo treatment, they received a recommendation to see a surgeon at Northwestern who specialized in cancer and tumor removal, and Jan's surgery was set for March of 2016.

Fortunately, the surgery went exactly as planned and the doctors said that everything came out great. But Jan still had to start life over from scratch. "I couldn't write, I didn't know my name, I couldn't do anything," she said. In her hospital bed, she had to be zipped in a mesh, tent-like enclosure to keep her from doing anything rash that would agitate the healing surgical incision.

Then came the time to build back all the physical and cognitive skills that Jan had lost due to the brain surgery. She was checked into the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, now known as the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab, and started the re-learning process. She spent full days dedicated to her recovery, with therapists helping her learn how to read, write and walk again.



"I can't say enough about Wellness House. If it wasn't for this place, I don't think Jan would be doing as well as she's doing now."

Merv Szalaj

It was after finishing at the rehabilitation center that Jan and Merv decided to give Wellness House a try. They had heard about it through Jan's primary doctor and the staff at Hinsdale Hospital. At first, Jan was hesitant to attend programs. But Merv encouraged her, helped her get ready in the mornings, and drove her to Wellness House. They came three times a week for Jan to take exercise classes.

At the beginning it was very tiring for Jan. She'd come home after class and need to take a nap. But as time went on, she continued getting stronger. They started doing an errand or two after class, sometimes just walking laps around Walmart. Having a consistent routine of getting up, getting ready and getting out of the house to exercise helped Jan get back to her normal self.

Over the last four years of attending exercise programs at Wellness House, Jan has gained the strength to do so much more. She returned to doing the things she loves, [continued on page 4](#)

Learning How to Walk Again

continued from page 3

“When Jan first started coming here, she was afraid she wouldn’t know anybody,” Merv said. “But after a while, it’s like everybody here is your family.”

Merv Szalaj

like household organizing and cooking, and she and Merv often go out and do things together. **They enjoy getting lunch together after attending Wellness House, and they’ve also had the opportunity to travel.**

But cancer isn’t always that simple. Despite all this progress, Jan started feeling less like herself earlier this year, around the same time that COVID-19 began to take hold in the U.S. She went to the hospital for some tests and heard the news that no one wants to hear: her brain cancer was back.

Jan has been undergoing chemotherapy again at Hinsdale Hospital, this time with extra precautions. Merv can only come to the door to drop her off and pick her up, instead of being by her side during treatment. And of course, everyone must wear masks and gloves. Fortunately, the chemo and steroids have already helped reduce swelling in Jan’s brain and she’s acting a lot more like herself.

During everything that has been happening in the world and in Jan’s life, she is taking advantage of our new format of online programs. With Jan going in and out of the hospital, the convenience of participating in her regular exercise class from the comfort of her own home has been essential. And Merv is now able to join in on the program without having the limitation of classroom space. They enjoy being with the exercise group virtually and are now hoping to branch out and try some nutrition programs as well.

While the exercise programs are what Jan utilizes the most at Wellness House, she and Merv enjoy attending many of the annual

special events, like Some Enchanted Evening or the Walk. They started attending the Walk in 2017 while Jan was still recovering from her surgery, so her first year, she took part in the 10-step walk—an abbreviated course that allows people with physical limitations to participate without doing the full 3K.

Since then, Jan has been able to join the normal walk course. She and Merv create their own mini team and are dedicated to showing their support for an organization that has helped them immensely during the recovery process. And while not a part of one of the large walk teams, they always show up early to join the group photo with everyone from their exercise class.

They love the community of the Walk when everyone from Wellness House comes together and catches up with the friends they’ve made over the years. “When Jan first started coming here, she was afraid she wouldn’t know anybody,” Merv said. “But after a while, it’s like everybody here is your family.”

With the Virtual Walk this year, things will be a little different. People will participate wherever they are, in whatever way works best for them. This new format will give Jan the flexibility—in the midst of treatment—to stay close to home and choose how much she walks. There may not be big group photos or walk courses this year, but there will still be the camaraderie of knowing that everyone is walking together, in their own way, so that no one facing cancer has to walk alone.

VIRTUAL

Walk

for **Wellness House** for LIVING with CANCER

Sunday June 28

CELEBRATING **30** YEARS

Your Walk • Your Route • Your Distance
Virtual Welcome & Program at 8:00 AM #NeverWalkAlone



Register today! walk.wellnesshouse.org

Virtual Walk for Wellness House #NeverWalkAlone

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our annual Walk for Wellness House will now be a Virtual Walk on **Sunday, June 28, 2020**. Your support of the Walk means that people affected by cancer will never have to walk alone.

What is a virtual walk?

A Virtual Walk is a real walk, but on your terms: you choose the course and what time you start. You can choose to do a 3K or a 5K, a walk or a run, or any form of movement that speaks to you.

In honor of the 30th anniversary of Wellness House, those with physical limitations can also choose to do a 30 Step Walk (in the place of the 10 Step Walk which has traditionally occurred at the start of the Walk).

Virtual Walk Sponsors

Every year, we are so thankful to our Walk sponsors who help make this special event possible. And even though our Walk is virtual this year, we still rely on the generosity of our sponsors to help us navigate this new landscape and ensure that no participant will ever walk alone. We appreciate their dedication to supporting all those affected by cancer, now more than ever.

Our sponsors also love to participate in the Walk! We are excited to see their team creativity as they take part in the Virtual Walk this year.

A big thank you to all the sponsors for our 2020 Virtual Walk for Wellness House!

Presenting Sponsor: The Inland Real Estate Group of Companies, Inc.*

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**Denotes sponsors who also form walk teams*

Why We Walk – Millennium Trust Company



Wellness House was introduced to me by my oncologist as a great source to connect with other individuals experiencing my pain. It was optional and free to patients and their families. It was the best decision I had made as I realized that I was not alone. There is so much to do, from meditation to group discussions on how to deal with the new norm. Although I did not share this with very many people and

much less my work family, I found a way to share it with them in silence.

Being part of the MTCares committee at Millennium Trust Company allowed me to present the Walk for Wellness House without having to share my story. Those who knew all jumped on board and we did our first Walk in 2017. It has grown and it has become one of our staple charities. Wellness House is an extraordinary place full of love and compassion, which falls in line with our company values. Not only did this deadly silent disease attack one member of the Millennium Family, it has attacked several and this is one of the many reasons we are so passionate about it.

- Rosie, Millennium Trust Company

Rising to the Challenge During COVID-19

Programs moved online to make critical support accessible from home.

As COVID-19 began to spread, and a stay at home order appeared inevitable, there was only one thing that was abundantly clear: The fast-evolving nature of the pandemic and shutdown left little time for planning. The Wellness House team was immediately challenged with the task of how to provide programs with as little disruption as possible. With the help of a strong board, staff and donors like you, we rose to the challenge - together. It took just a day and a half to move cancer support programs online and by the end of the week, almost all programs were being delivered online with few changes to the schedule. It was apparent very early on that this was the right decision. In just 6 weeks, nearly 800 people made over 6000 visits to online programs. The need for online programs was evident in the numbers as well as the profound emotional response woven throughout the online experience. A participant recently stated, "I've really enjoyed these classes and seeing others. While we're apart, it's almost like we're together".

The majority of our experts and specialists had minimal experience presenting programs through an online platform. In just a matter of days, the unknown was replaced with community and connection. An individual or family

"I just finished the three-hour event Art of You, led by Sherri Wick, Margo, Toni and Elli. It was... well, there are no words. Energizing. Grounding. Uplifting. Playful. Deep. It was a wonderful way to connect during this time of social distancing."
– Mile Square Participant

might join a support group, participate in chair yoga, learn how to make almond milk, learn Tai Chi. Kids can engage in Teleplay Therapy, Wellness Recess or even a Kids Picnic during lunchtime, in addition to other family support. The opportunities for online presentations are boundless and the creativity is flowing as we develop new ways to inspire and engage participants in a meaningful way.

"Coping with the effects of cancer has not taken a back seat for participants; in fact, coping with cancer has become even more challenging during these stressful times, especially as healthcare systems become overwhelmed and financial resources are strained," said Lisa Kolavennu, Executive Director of Wellness House.

Now, anyone affected by cancer can attend Wellness House online classes such as support groups, yoga (English and Spanish), nutrition and cooking demonstrations, meditation, exercise, art and educational classes, all from the comforts of their own home. There are no geographical barriers, so programs can now reach people who have no other way to get support. Additionally, all of our offsite programs conducted through partner locations can also be accessible by anyone. The increase in accessibility has been a game changer. The need for support is far reaching.

Wellness House will continue to



"This is so great. I'm staying grounded. I hope you continue doing this because I can't go out right now."
– Participant

provide in-person and online support beyond COVID-19 at the main location in Hinsdale and partner locations all around Chicago, including our largest partner location at Mile Square Health Center in the medical district. We'll continue to innovate and rise to the challenge to provide life changing support, no matter the external circumstances. We began this bold journey 30 years ago and need your support to continue taking courageous steps towards a world where all people affected by cancer thrive.

Celebrating 30 years of Community

Changing lives – past, present and future.

Wellness House was built on the strength, determination and resiliency of a community that forges ahead no matter the barrier or the challenge. There are thousands of people who have contributed to the strength and spirit of Wellness House. *You are one of them!*

We asked 4 questions of 30 people who represent the many friends of Wellness House like you. Below are the first of many thoughts and treasures we'll share throughout the year.

Bill Walker

Executive Director, Wellness House



What brought you to Wellness House and when? I was asked by Rick George to interview for the Executive Director position as the Board of Directors sought to build a stronger foundation to keep up with the passion and success of volunteers in garnering attention and support for the mission.

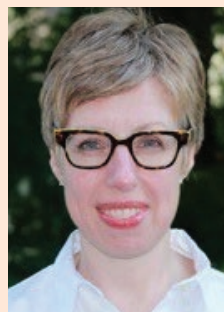
Can you recall a specific meaningful memory or interaction at Wellness House? Memory after memory! But perhaps one of the strongest was the first year we held the Walk for Wellness House. Originally, we were going to have people start at five different points and walk to the house, an effort to bring the area together. We had publicized well, had an exceptional volunteer committee, and the day was especially beautiful, but there had been no preregistration. We had no idea if people would respond. It was prior to cell phones, so there were no reports of numbers starting the walk. The sound of voices, wheels turning on wagons and skates, and plodding of feet seemed to come from everywhere at once - one of those magical moments for Wellness House.

What makes Wellness House unique? Huge numbers of organizations are spurred by need and passion and many benefit from solid mission and carefully developed programming. Very few develop as solid a base of volunteers who embrace that mission and programming as Wellness House does. It is held together by an extraordinary sense of community fed by constantly asking, acknowledging, linking, and thanking.

What one word would you use to describe Wellness House?
COMPASSION

Marci Goldberg

Participant and Ambassador



What brought you to Wellness House and when? On February 7th, 2018, I heard the words 1 in 8 women will hear - "you have breast cancer." Those first few days and weeks were horrible, and I had a really hard time wrapping my head around what was going on. Luckily, one of the things I realized was, I needed to be around people that were going through what I was going through. After a Google search and referral from one of my doctors, I found

Wellness House. 10 days later, I was meeting with Ellen Niemen, one of the social workers, for an orientation.

Can you recall a specific meaningful memory or interaction at Wellness House? This is a tough question as each moment there has been truly special, meaningful and impactful. If I had to pick just ONE memory or interaction, it would be walking through the Wellness House doors. During these past two years, I have had my share of challenges and bad days. But each time I walk through those doors, all that goes away. I am able to "breathe," I am calm, happy and hopeful.

What makes Wellness House unique? The people, definitely the people! The staff is incredible. They are genuine, they have heart and they are extremely caring. They are passionate about what they do, and they always go the extra mile. Angela, the lead dietitian; Kelli, the Community Relations Manager; and Barb Kilkus at the front desk are inspiring and always put a smile on my face.

What one word would you use to describe Wellness House?
Wellness House has been an integral part of my life these past two years, and I don't know what I would do without it. It is truly my "haven" and gives me hope for my life ahead.

Wellness Oncology Support Counselor meeting participants where they're at



“I love that we're able to bring the wonderful work of Wellness House out into the community.”

- Tasha Chasson,
MSW, LSW, Oncology
Support Counselor

Meet Our Experts

Tasha Chasson, MSW, LSW, Oncology Support Counselor

Not everyone in the Chicagoland area who is affected by cancer has the means to come visit our main location in Hinsdale. That's why Tasha Chasson, one of our support counselors, goes out into the community and facilitates groups at various partner locations.

Tasha joined our program staff at Wellness House in August of 2019, but her career in social work started after years of working in medical offices and wishing she could be a better resource to patients. She wanted to be able to help people practically and emotionally navigate the medical field, so she decided to go back to school for a master's in social work. During her schooling, Tasha became familiar with Wellness House through her outpatient oncology internship at UIC. This is where she also developed her passion for oncology support.

Tasha's primary role at Wellness House is facilitating support groups, like the diagnosis-specific groups for lung cancer or multiple myeloma, or the topical groups like young adults or spirituality. She also provides short-term personal counseling for people affected by cancer, whether diagnosed themselves, caregivers, or bereaved individuals.

What lights Tasha up the most about her job is spending time out in the community. Besides the time she spends at our main location in Hinsdale, she also facilitates weekly groups at Rush Oak Park and the infusion center at AMITA Cancer Institute. “As a social worker, we learn to serve people who wouldn't necessarily get the resources otherwise,” Tasha says. “So, I see our partner locations as fulfilling that aspect of social work.”

One thing that Tasha loves about working at Wellness House is seeing the support that people provide for one another. While she facilitates the groups, she says it's the participants who are doing the hard work. She tells us, “they ask thoughtful questions of each other and provide support that is more meaningful because it's coming from someone who has a similar experience.”

Even during the coronavirus outbreak, Tasha (and the rest of the Wellness House staff) have been able to maintain online support groups over Zoom for both our Hinsdale and partner locations. And Tasha is still offering one-on-one counseling sessions, now either by phone or video calls. “Participants have been appreciative of the ability to remain connected with their fellow group mates,” Tasha says. “They are so happy to see other people who understand what they are going through as a person affected by cancer during this pandemic.”

Tasha's professional highlights

- Earned a BA in Communications from the University of Houston
- Earned an MSW from University of Illinois at Chicago
- Licensed Social Worker in the state of Illinois



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David Blaydes and his team may be reached at info@rpiplan.com or 630.778.8100. www.rpiplan.com

WILL WE HAVE A COVID-19 RECESSION?

No one knows with any real certainty how much, or for how long, COVID-19 will impact the US economy. What we do know is that it will have an impact. And, after data releases of recent weeks, we also know that the US economy was in very good shape before it hit.

To put things into perspective, the H3N2 Flu pandemic hit the US from September 1968 through March 1969, killing around 34,000 people in the US according to the Centers for Disease Control. During the last quarter of 1968 and first quarter of 1969, real GDP grew at an average annual rate of 4.0%. The H1N1 Flu in 2009 also did not lead to a recession.

However, a much more negative story unfolded in late 1957 and early 1958 when the US was hit by the H2N2 Flu which killed almost 70,000 in the US and didn't spare younger people as much as COVID-19. Real GDP was growing around 3% annually in 1957, but as the flu started to peak in Q4, the economy shrank at a 4.1% annual rate, followed by an annualized 10.0% plunge in the first quarter of 1958, the deepest drop for any quarter in the post-World War II era. But then, right after the plunge, the economy rebounded at a 7.8% annual rate for the next five quarters.

The bottom line is that we've had severe flus before without a recession and when we did have a downturn, the economy bounced back very quickly. The stock market is pricing in a steep drop in profits, which is certainly possible. A strong recovery will reverse this as it has in the past.

Questions? Please consult RPI at 630-778-8100 x100.

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Our Mission

Wellness House envisions a community where all people affected by cancer thrive. Offered at no cost, and as a complement to medical treatment, our programs educate, support, and empower participants so they will improve their physical and emotional well-being.

Learn more about us at wellnesshouse.org

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