

# An Unexpected Path

**Brianna & Austin Harmon** | page 3



Wellness News

## Dear Friends,

As spring arrives and the world begins to open, new signs of life are sprouting all around us. Signs that remind us of the resilience that emerges during times of challenge. Despite the losses and difficulties that have happened over the past year, we've found great hope in unexpected places such as online programs and virtual events. At the same time, the unwavering support of our community has been a constant source of hope and for that, we will always be grateful.

With our annual Walk for Wellness quickly approaching, there is an undeniable energy taking shape. We see teams fundraising, individuals signing up for the very first time, and longstanding sponsors returning with determination and dedication to our mission. We are empowered by these shows of support and all that can happen when we collectively pull together—even when apart. This year, our goal is to walk 3,000 miles! All day long we will walk in the neighborhood and parks surrounding Wellness House, in Forest Preserve locations throughout the city and suburbs, and individual locations chosen by walkers. As the miles accumulate that day, so will the hope and strength we find in one another. For participants Brianna and Austin Harmon, who are profiled on page 3 of this newsletter, the walk brings a sense of togetherness, community, and now after an unexpected cancer diagnosis, a place of heartfelt connection to Wellness House.

Building community has always been a core value of Wellness House. We invite you to the Walk for Wellness House on May 2 and share in the excitement as we walk 3,000 miles together to make a difference in the life of another. We are profoundly thankful for your dedication and passion to help people find hope and live their best lives during and after cancer.

With appreciation,



**Lisa K. Kolavennu, MA, LCPC**  
Executive Director



**Lauren Staniar Haarlow**  
Board Chair

**Walk**   
**for Wellness**  
**House** for LIVING with CANCER  
**Sunday • May 2 • 2021**

Register now at [walk.wellnesshouse.org](http://walk.wellnesshouse.org)

The Wellness House  
Ball is coming this fall!

We're busy  
making plans for an  
illuminating evening.

Watch our website for details at [wellnesshouse.org](http://wellnesshouse.org)



# An Unexpected Path

**Brianna and Austin Harmon** enjoy taking part in community walks and events as a meaningful way to stay active and spend time outside together. The Walk for Wellness House is their favorite.

They enjoy the community feel and seeing all the people and families who rally around the mission to support people affected by cancer.

**“I had known about Wellness House in high school and even volunteered for the Walk in 2007 during my freshman year,” Brianna said.** “Then I worked for a company in Oak Brook called Millennium Trust, which is a sponsor, and I participated in their Walk team.” In 2018 and 2019, Brianna and Austin attended the Walk together, and each year they’ve felt the special energy of a community making a difference.

When Brianna and Austin were married in November 2019, they planned a honeymoon to Rome and a few other trips and looked forward to many adventures together. Then everything changed as life took an unexpected turn. On March 9, 2020, Austin was diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin’s Lymphoma – just four months after they were married and right at the start of the pandemic. “COVID-19 changed things in its own way, but on top of that, I learned I had stage 4 cancer. The scan was lit up, and all my lymph nodes were the size of golf balls. It was really scary and

nerve-racking,” Austin said. The doctors told them there was a good success rate, but the treatment had to begin right away. All their plans were put on hold, and Austin was thrust into chemotherapy and daily medications. “There wasn’t a lot of time to think about it,” he said. “The treatment was really hard at first, but in a way, there was almost a silver lining with COVID because we couldn’t go anywhere anyway.”

Since Brianna already knew about Wellness House, she reached out for support right after Austin was diagnosed. The mission of Wellness House took on a new meaning as they experienced the fear and the unknown future of a cancer diagnosis. Austin registered for the Cancer Support Group and Brianna with the Caregiver Support Group – both held online due to COVID-19. For Brianna, the Caregiver Group helped her navigate feelings and fears. **“We are really lucky to have a great family and friend support system, but for me, there’s a different level of understanding when you are around people who are also living with it,” she said.** “You can be mad, and you can be upset with the person who has cancer, but life doesn’t stop because of that. It’s a complex feeling for sure. When I first saw all the medicine we needed to keep track of, even hour by hour, I didn’t know how I would do it or manage it. One of the group members gave great suggestions that I was able to take back to Austin. I was able to share my anxieties with the group and, through it, I was able to calm down and help him.” Austin remembers that the best part of Group was hearing others’ experiences while he was going through treatment. “There are people in the group who are in remission or experiencing treatment at the same time. It was a huge

benefit to hear tips that you never thought about and be with people who know what you’re going through.”

As a newly married couple, a cancer diagnosis can add levels of complexity and stress to the relationship. “I listened to others in the group and realized that it’s not us, it’s the sickness that might be causing stress,” said Austin. **They navigated their cancer experience together by participating in an 8-week Meaning Centered Psychotherapy program and just recently attended a special Valentine’s Day date night called Some Enchanted Evening.**

Austin has made his way through the most difficult part of his treatment and is waiting for the scan results. “I’m not going to worry about the results,” he said. “It will be great if it turns out to be good news, but I know I can handle it if it isn’t. We’re doing ok right now.”

Brianna and Austin have had a challenging year, but they got through it with the support of family, friends and Wellness House. When they took part in the 2020 Virtual Walk for Wellness House, after Austin was newly diagnosed, it took on a whole new meaning. They are looking forward to attending the Walk again this year. “It was a weird twist of fate, and I’m amazed at the resources Wellness House provides for people who are experiencing cancer,” said Brianna.

They share excitement for the future and are making plans for a vacation. “We didn’t get to take our honeymoon, so the next trip we take will be the first we take together,” Brianna/Austin said. “One day, we know we’ll get to Rome.”

# MAKING A COLLECTIVE IMPACT: Walk for Wellness House



**The Walk for Wellness House** has brought our community together around a common cause for nearly as long as Wellness House has existed. Built on a strong foundation of corporate support from longtime partners like Inland Real Estate Companies, the Walk engages everyone from Wellness House program participants, to our neighbors in the community surrounding our Kay & Mike Birck Home of Hope in Hinsdale, as well as friends and business partners throughout the region. Revenue from the Walk comprises nearly 20% of our annual budget each year, thanks to every registrant, team, sponsor and donor coming together to make a difference.



This year, the collective impact is about more than dollars raised. Rather than coming together all at once in Hinsdale, this year's Walk will take place on **May 2, 2021** throughout the day in the neighborhood and parks surrounding Wellness House in Hinsdale, and from Forest Preserve locations throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. To unify everyone participating this year, we are challenging our Walk participants to combine their miles walked toward a collective goal:

**Walk**  
for **Wellness**  
**House** for LIVING  
with CANCER  
Sunday • May 2 • 2021

## Together, Let's Walk 3,000 miles! #WalkAMile

While this is a temporary transition to a multiple location event, in the interest of public health and safety, we hope this shift makes the Walk more accessible to people in new and different communities. One of the greatest lessons learned this past year is that people do not need to be physically together to support one another. **We are committed to meeting people with cancer where they are, and in whatever ways that people can be connected.**

We look forward to the Walk bringing people together around a common goal, proving once again that nothing stops Wellness House.

*To register, join or support a Team in the Walk, please visit [walk.wellnesshouse.org](http://walk.wellnesshouse.org).*

## Looking for a way to volunteer?

**We're looking for a few volunteers to help us with our annual Walk.**

- Walk for Wellness House T-shirt Pickup Volunteers (Week of 4/26): Assist walkers/runners in picking up their walk t-shirts.
- Walk for Wellness House Volunteers (5/2/21): Cheer on walkers/runners at different locations, provide information, and hand out water.



# Celebrating 30 Years of Volunteerism at The Courtyard

Since the opening of The Courtyard in 1991, Nancy Keenan, Sheila Botti, Kathy Ryan and countless other volunteers have built a thriving and profitable consignment shop with one clear purpose – to help people affected by cancer. This incredible threesome along with The Courtyard Manager, Marna Slawson, has cultivated a culture of volunteerism around a shared vision that has produced lifelong friendships and mission driven support for Wellness House. In the early days, The Courtyard began with no internet, cell phones, website or Facebook. Nancy, Sheila and Kathy started the endeavor by visiting homes for items to consign, and scoured countless garage sales, estate sales and flea markets to find items to sell. To this very day, a walk through The Courtyard offers unique treasures presented with love and care through every corner of the shop.

The spirit of determination continued even during a pandemic. The staff and volunteers pivoted to an online consignment model – which is no small feat for a single consignment shop. The Courtyard now offers an online and in-person shopping experience. This spirit of dedication has resulted in over 5 million dollars of support for Wellness House. “The Courtyard has made an incredible impact to the ongoing sustainability of Wellness House and we couldn’t be more grateful to all the volunteers who have made this happen, said Lisa Kolavennu, Executive Director, Wellness House.



*Thank you to all the dedicated volunteers, staff and community members who have made The Courtyard not only a success, but a model for mission-driven giving.*

## Sustain your Impact: Monthly Giving to Wellness House

There are many reasons, and many ways to give to Wellness House. One of the most impactful ways you can make a difference for people affected by cancer is to make a monthly recurring gift charged to your credit card.

**Marilyn Benuska**, longtime friend and program participant at Wellness House, has been giving monthly since 2016. Her decision to give monthly was rooted in her desire to give back.

*“When you give monthly, you can be sure that the people with cancer who need help can get the help when they need it. Monthly donors help an organization plan for the future and be more creative and adaptive to current needs. And as a donor, I like that I don’t have to think about it. I just know people are getting the help they need.”*

Wellness House programs have helped Marilyn and so many others find community and connection. “Groups at Wellness House become a little community that meets every week. Knowing that my gift is helping make that possible is important to me. **And just like participants benefit from consistency in attending programs, I know that my giving on a consistent basis is helping Wellness House thrive.**”

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**JOIN MARILYN AND OTHERS BY MAKING YOUR FULLY TAX DEDUCTIBLE MONTHLY GIFT TODAY** at [wellnesshouse.org/Donate](https://wellnesshouse.org/Donate)! We will acknowledge your donation at year end and send you updates periodically about the impact of your gifts.

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# Bringing her passion for helping people and enthusiasm for exercise to a whole new level



## Meet Our Experts – Vania Perry

**Vania Perry, MS, NASM-CPT, CETI CES, Oncology Exercise Specialist**

As one of our newest Wellness House team members, Vania Perry brings her enthusiasm for exercise and her passion for helping people to everything she does.

Vania has been teaching classes at Wellness House as a substitute facilitator for two years and officially joined the staff this past November. As an Oncology Exercise Specialist, she leads weekly classes specifically designed for those affected by cancer, focusing on practices such as yoga, stretching and flexibility. She has also started giving informational presentations and recently led a session during our Wellness Evolving special event series.

For Vania, finding her place at Wellness House was like finding a diamond in the rough. After years of working in corporate management, she felt burnt out, so she pivoted her career to exercise science. She pursued an MS in Applied Exercise Science and wanted to find a way to use her training to help others. “After a couple of cancer scares myself, plus the fact that I have been living with a Traumatic Brain Injury for the past 30 years, I felt a calling to give back to those living with and managing chronic illness,” she said.

Vania finds joy in working with a demographic of individuals who care so much for themselves and their health. She understands that they are often at their most vulnerable state when she sees them, so she uses empathy and care to ensure that participants get the exercise experience that is best for them. And they often turn the tables around and enrich her life just as much. “Even if I might be having a tough day, the participants bring light and warmth to any situation,” she said.

Vania draws her teaching inspiration from leaders she has encountered in the past, especially as she went through her own medical issues. She said, “I love to serve others because of those servant leaders who cared for me in my most vulnerable times as a patient.”

Outside of Wellness House, Vania is very involved in the health and exercise community. She’s a contributing author for an upcoming book about women who have weathered tough times, *Faith, Failure, Success, Volume 2, Surviving the Storm*. She’s also a long-time Lung Health Champion for the Respiratory Health Association for Hustle Chicago, raising money to further research into cleaner air, lung, and respiratory health for cancer patients and asthmatics.

Vania’s passion and warm spirit shine through in all aspects of her life, and we are incredibly grateful to have her as part of the Wellness House team.

“Participants tell me they love my energy and how I engage the class. My goal is to motivate them and remind them that this is a lifestyle change and we’re all in this – TOGETHER.”

- Vania Perry, MS, NASM-CPT, CETI CES, Oncology Exercise Specialist

### Vania’s professional highlights

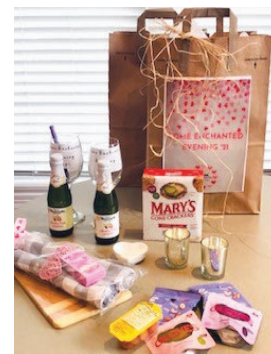
- Earned a BA in English from Saint Xavier University
- Earned an MS in Applied Exercise Science with a concentration on Nutrition from Concordia University
- Certified Cancer Exercise Specialist by the Cancer Exercise Training Institute (CETI)
- Certified Personal Trainer by the National Association of Sports Medicine (NASM)

# Special Events Bring Joy to Hearts Young and Old



## Some Enchanted Evening

This beloved annual Valentine's event for couples traditionally takes place at the main location in Hinsdale, but this year we moved it online. Things might have looked a little different, but an enchanted evening was still had by all. Volunteers and board members delivered event bags to all participating couples with everything needed for the night ahead. Chef Sarah Beth guided couples to create their own charcuterie board. Couples dined on butternut squash soup and then created their own mandala and a personalized wine glass while listening to a live musical performance. Heartfelt thanks to the incredible team of board members, volunteers, staff, chef Sarah Beth, musician Jeffrey Deutsch and sponsor Thomas and Christina Grusecki Foundation who made this year's Some Enchanted Evening a wonderful event.



## Happy Hearts Family Party



Love was in the air during the **Happy Hearts Family event** where 24 children and their parents took part in a fun-filled online Valentine's Day Party. Kids and parents created their own trail mix snack, made a foam flower craft, painted rocks, went on a scavenger hunt for items to use as musical instruments and performed along with a fun "Kitchen Band" song. The evening continued with bingo and valentine-themed stories as children interacted with one another and commented on each other's creations. All ingredients and craft items were delivered to the families before the event started so that all they needed to do was have fun.

## Moving Through Cancer

The latest Wellness Evolving event, **Moving Through Cancer**, took place virtually on Saturday, February 27th and welcomed 105 people affected by cancer. During the event, participants learned about new research behind the importance of exercise for cancer survivors from special guest Dr. Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH, Distinguished at Penn State College of Medicine and a past president of the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). Following the morning presentation, participants were led through a series of exercises and stretches suitable for the home by Wellness House's Oncology Exercise Specialist, Vania Perry.



**Wellness Evolving** is a new series at Wellness House designed to introduce participants to research, activities, and perspectives that will help to improve their overall health and wellness during cancer. A combination of education and interaction, these programs allow participants to engage real-time in what they have just learned about, increasing the potential that they will implement the new knowledge or activities in their own lives.

*Special Events are held throughout the year and could only take place because of the generosity of donors like you.*

**Wellness House** | Main Location  
The Kay & Mike Birck Home of Hope  
131 North County Line Road  
Hinsdale, Illinois 60521

## Required Distributions from Your IRA



David Blaydes and his team may be reached at [info@rpiplan.com](mailto:info@rpiplan.com) or 630.778.8100. [www.rpiplan.com](http://www.rpiplan.com)

### Are you tired of paying taxes on your required distributions from your IRA?

If you are an affluent retiree, that might be the case. The income is always nice, but the taxes that come with it? Not so much.

If only you could satisfy your yearly IRA withdrawal requirement minus the attached taxes. Guess what: there might be a way.

**If you gift traditional IRA assets to charity, you could see some big tax savings.** The Internal Revenue Service calls this a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD), and you may want to explore its potential. Some criteria must be met: you need to be at least 70½ years old in the year of the donation, the donation must take the form of a direct transfer of assets from the IRA custodian to the charity, and the charity must be “qualified” in the eyes of the I.R.S. Any 501(c)(3) non-profit organization meets the I.R.S. qualification.

The amount you gift can be applied toward your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) for the year, and you may exclude it from your taxable income. You can donate as much as \$100,000 to a qualified charity this way in a single year. That limit is per IRA owner; if you are married, and you and your spouse both have traditional IRAs, you can each donate up to \$100,000.

This is not an overly complex strategy to implement. Keep in mind the distribution must be payable directly to the non-profit organization or charity, not to you. In addition, your tax preparer must identify the distribution as a QCD on your federal tax return. This is crucial and must not be overlooked, because the custodian of your IRA will probably report your QCD as a normal IRA distribution.

**If you want to make a charitable IRA gift, start the process before the year ends.** If you try to make the gift in late December, your IRA custodian might not be able to move fast enough for you, and the asset transfer may occur later than you would like (i.e., after December 31). Talk with a tax or financial professional early in the year so that you can plan a charitable IRA donation with some time to spare.

**Questions?** Please consult RPI at 630.778.8100 x110.

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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](http://wellnesshouse.org)**

## Thank you to our generous grantors:

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T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies  
Chicago Board of Trade Foundation  
The Coleman Foundation  
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You'll treasure the experience.

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