

Mary's Story

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Together,
Every Step
of the Way



Wellness News

Dear Friends,

Cancer care is evolving in profound and hopeful ways. Advances in treatment mean that more people are living longer with cancer, and survivorship is expanding in ways we could not have imagined a generation ago. Yet with that progress comes a growing reality: more individuals and families are navigating the long, complicated terrain of life during and after cancer.

Care is no longer needed only at diagnosis; it is needed across months and years by spouses, children, caregivers, and by those learning how to live with uncertainty that can linger long after treatment ends. This is where Wellness House meets people, and where your partnership makes that care possible.

As the oncology landscape changes, we are rising to meet it. We are deepening collaboration with healthcare providers so supportive oncology is integrated into the continuum of care. We are expanding our reach so more families can access evidence-based programs that care for the whole person and those who surround them, building strength through movement and nutrition, restoring steadiness through counseling and stress management, regaining confidence through salon services, and fostering connection through shared experience. We do this with intention, ensuring that wherever we serve, we are not simply present, but truly part of the communities we enter.

Mary, whose story you will read in this issue, said it better than we ever could: *“Wellness House provided support in a way that strengthened our whole family. It helped carry what felt impossible to carry alone.”*

That is our purpose. We support the whole person and, in doing so, reinforce the family and the networks around them. This kind of care is not optional; it is essential, and it is sustained by people who believe no one should face cancer alone.

On Sunday, May 3, we will rise together at the annual Walk for Wellness House. The extraordinary generosity demonstrated at October’s Timeless Wellness House Ball revealed what is possible when this community comes together in belief and action. The Walk is another powerful expression of that commitment. Every team formed, every step taken, and every gift made extends the circle of care for families who rely on us.

As we look toward a future that will require thoughtful growth and expanded reach, we move forward with confidence in those who stand beside us. I hope you will join us on Walk day by gathering friends and family, walking in honor of someone you love, or making a gift that carries this work forward. Your participation is more than symbolic; it is a tangible reminder that no one facing cancer walks alone.

Thank you for your partnership and trust in our mission, and for continuing to rise with us.

With gratitude,



Lisa K. Kolavennu, MA, LCPC
Chief Executive Officer



Stephen Smith
Board Chair

Volunteer Needs

Volunteers are vital to Wellness House, and we couldn’t do what we do without them!



Volunteers make it possible for Wellness House participants to enjoy outstanding support during their cancer journey by serving in various functions throughout the organization.

Courtyard Volunteers

The Courtyard, our local consignment and retail store, sells a variety of fine furnishings, with all proceeds benefiting Wellness House. Whether it’s helping customers or setting up eye-catching displays, we would appreciate retail or computer support.

Shifts are 4 hours long, with a commitment of 1-2 shifts per month.

Walk for Wellness House Volunteers!

Get involved in our Walk for Wellness House on Sunday, May 3! Interested in volunteering for the Walk for the **first time?** Scan the QR code to view the Walk for Wellness House Volunteer Application and sign up:



Have you volunteered for the Walk before?

Great! Then you are already in our volunteer database and do not need to submit an additional volunteer application!

To sign up for a Walk for Wellness House volunteer assignment, email volunteeradmin@wellnesshouse.org, and we’ll provide more details.

Volunteer With Wellness House

We’re seeking friendly, service-oriented volunteers to create a warm and welcoming experience for participants, staff, and the broader Wellness House community.

Volunteers must be available for at least two shifts per month during the following times:

Fridays: 12 Noon – 3 pm, 3 pm – 5 pm
Saturdays: 9 am – 12 Noon

Wellness House Ambassador

Help spread awareness of Wellness House and The Courtyard while supporting revenue and participation goals. As a Wellness House Ambassador, you’ll serve as an extension of our staff and an integral part of the Wellness House community.

Healthy Living Instructors

Join us in empowering and supporting Wellness House participants! We’re seeking licensed or certified professionals to join our volunteer team of instructors.

For additional information about volunteering, visit wellnesshouse.org/volunteer/

Mary's Story



Together, Every Step of the Way

On Sundays, Mary used to stand at the stove with something delicious simmering and three conversations going at once. Someone would be setting the table; someone else would be sneaking a taste. The grandchildren drifted in and out of the kitchen like it was the center of the universe, because for them, it was.

That kitchen was Mary's domain. Not because anyone assigned it to her, but because she loved taking care of people. When a new baby came home, Mary showed up with groceries and stayed to fold laundry. When someone had a hard week, she made soup and didn't ask questions unless they wanted to talk. Her work in those moments was love made visible; it was tangible and steady, and given wholeheartedly.

Cancer did not fit into that rhythm.

The day she was diagnosed, the room felt smaller than it should have. Mary remembers the doctor speaking, but the words blurred together. What she cannot forget are her children's faces. They were lined up against the wall of the hospital room, trying to be strong for her and failing in the most human of ways.

“That was the hardest part,” Mary says quietly. “Seeing the fear on them. I wanted to fix it and I couldn’t.”

Amber, her daughter, describes those first weeks as disorienting. There were appointments, tests, and long stretches of waiting. There were conversations that began with, “We don't know yet.” For a family that makes decisions together and moves as one, the uncertainty felt unbearable.

Greg, Amber's husband, has been part of the family long enough to know its gravity. “When you marry into this family, you don't hover on the edges,” he says. “You're in it. You're part of it. It's strong, and we wouldn't have it any other way.”

Mary has always been the center of that circle. Seeing her confront something so frightening unsettled everyone. The one who had always held the family upright was suddenly the one in need of holding.

The months that followed were heavy. Surgeries, complications, delays. Medical jargon that required translation. While Mary moved through treatment, the rest of the family rearranged their lives without ceremony. Carpools were covered, dinners rotated houses, paperwork was handled at kitchen tables late at night. Jokes were told to add levity when the room needed to breathe again.

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“In this family, the support network was already there, already strong,” Amber says. “We didn’t have to build it because of cancer. We were already showing up for each other.”



And still, there were parts of this journey they could not carry for her. Mary tried, at first, to keep being the helper. Even when she was exhausted, she asked how everyone else was doing. She noticed who looked overwhelmed. She apologized for being the reason plans had changed. It was difficult for her to sit still on Sundays while someone else stirred the sauce.

“She hated not being able to take care of everyone,” Amber says. “That’s who she is.” It was Mary’s sister, a nurse, who first mentioned Wellness House. She had seen what supportive oncology could mean for patients and families. Mary listened, but walking through another new door felt daunting. She was already navigating so much she did not recognize. The idea of one more new thing felt overwhelming.

Still, she agreed to go. Amber went with her.

They expected something clinical, maybe somber. Instead, they found a place that felt alive. People talking in the hallway. A volunteer greeting them by name. Programs that addressed things no one at the hospital had time to ask about. How are you sleeping? What are you eating? How are you coping when the house gets quiet at night?

“Wellness House gave me something that wasn’t cancer,” Mary says. “For a few hours, I wasn’t just a patient.”

She joined support groups where honesty and laughter could exist in the same room. She learned breathing techniques that steadied her on scan days. She met with a nutritionist who focused on a cancer-fighting diet and rebuilding strength. When her hair began to thin, she walked into the wig boutique unsure of what to expect and left feeling like herself again.

Greg wasn’t there that first day. Amber called him afterward.

For months, their conversations had revolved around logistics and fear. Who could watch the kids. What the doctor said. What might happen next. He had grown used to the strain in Amber’s voice, the weight she carried as a daughter trying to be steady for her mom and her own young family at the same time.

That afternoon was different.

“She called me after the visit,” Greg remembers. “It was the happiest I’d heard her sound in a long time. She kept saying, ‘It’s such a nice place! They do this. They do that.’ She was excited. Genuinely excited. I hadn’t heard that in months.”

He could hear it immediately. Not forced optimism, but hopeful relief. For the first time since Mary’s diagnosis, Amber wasn’t describing something going wrong. She was describing something

good, something that felt like genuine help.

“That call changed everything for me,” Greg says. “You could tell she felt hopeful.”

From that point on, Wellness House was not just another appointment on the calendar. It was a place that brought light back into conversations that had grown heavy. A place where Mary was supported in ways that strengthened the whole family. And for Greg, hearing hope return to Amber’s voice was the moment he knew they were no longer carrying this alone. Mary’s medical team guided her treatment; Wellness House helped her live inside it.

Today, Mary’s prognosis is hopeful. The doctors are encouraged. The scans have brought relief. But surviving cancer has not meant returning to the woman she was before. There is a new awareness now, a different measure of time.

“You don’t just snap back,” she says. “You have to learn how to live again in a body that’s been through something.”

That is where supportive oncology continues to meet her. Not only during treatment, but after. When the appointments are less frequent, but the questions linger.

Mary has started walking alongside newer participants who are where she once stood. She sits beside them in group and tells the truth about the fear and the unexpected grace. She offers to meet them at the door if they are nervous.

“If I can make it easier for someone else to walk in,” she says, “I will.”

This spring, her family will lace up their shoes for the Walk for Wellness House on May 3. The grandchildren who once darted through her kitchen will walk beside her. Amber will be there. Greg, meteorologist for ABC7 Chicago, will once again serve as Master of Ceremonies, lending his voice not just as a public figure, but as a son-in-law who is grateful.

“We’re lucky,” Greg says. “We have a strong family. Not everyone does. Wellness House becomes that support when it’s missing. The fact that it’s free removes one more burden people shouldn’t have to carry. If I can use my voice to inform people that the help they need is right here at Wellness House and that it doesn’t cost them anything, that is the best way I know to give back with the platform I have been given.”

On Walk Day, Mary will not be at the stove. She will be in the middle of the crowd, surrounded by the same family who once stood against a hospital wall trying to steady themselves. They are still steadying one another, they are still showing up. And now, with the Wellness House community beside them, they are moving forward together, #EveryStepoftheWay.

WALK FOR WELLNESS HOUSE

Supporting Cancer Patients and Families #EveryStepoftheWay

On Sunday, May 3, the Walk for Wellness House will bring together thousands of people who share a common understanding of how deeply cancer affects lives. Survivors, caregivers, families, friends, and supporters will gather in Hinsdale with one goal in mind: to make sure no one has to face cancer alone.

The morning will begin with a meaningful opening program that sets the tone for the day. **Greg Dutra of ABC7 Chicago** will serve as Master of Ceremonies, joined by announcer and presenters **Dan Wagner** and **Bob Baum of The Inland Real Estate Group of Companies, Inc.**, the Walk's Presenting Sponsor. A Wellness House participant will also share a personal reflection, offering a powerful reminder of why this day and this community matter so deeply.

After the opening program, teams, families, and individuals will take to the streets surrounding the Wellness House campus. Some will

walk together as teams, others on their own, and some from a location of their choosing. Some make a donation in lieu of walking. However they participate, each step represents a shared commitment to care, connection, and hope.

The Walk is a vital fundraiser for Wellness House, helping sustain more than 525 free programs each month. These programs support individuals and families impacted by cancer through exercise, nutrition, counseling, salon services, stress management, education, and family services. They are offered at the main location in Hinsdale, online, and at partner sites throughout Chicago, always at no cost to participants.

Every dollar raised, from individual donors to teams, helps ensure that when someone walks through the doors of Wellness House seeking support, they are met with expert care, compassion, and community. On May 3, each step taken reaches far beyond the Walk itself, helping carry that support to countless individuals and families throughout the year.

Register for the walk today at wellnesshouse.org/walk.



A TIMELESS NIGHT THAT BROUGHT THE MISSION TO LIFE

The 2025 Wellness House Ball: Timeless was a night that truly reflected the heart of the Wellness House community. Held on October 18 at the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel in Chicago, the Ball welcomed hundreds of supporters who came together in celebration of connection, generosity, and shared purpose. As Wellness House marked its 35th anniversary in 2025, the evening honored decades of support for individuals and families navigating cancer.

From the moment guests entered the jade and gold ballroom, the room felt alive with warmth and anticipation. A lively cocktail reception set the tone, followed by an elegant dinner that led into one of the most powerful moments of the evening: the Mission Moment video, which shared the story of the Croyle family. The room fell quiet as the video played, and then went completely still as Karen described the moment she realized she did not have to

explain cancer to her children alone. She spoke about coming to Wellness House not only for support in the present, but to put care, stability, and connection in place for her children if the worst were to happen. Her words grounded the room in the reason everyone had gathered; a reminder that the Wellness House Ball is a night of celebration in service of a mission that shows up for the hardest conversations families face, and for the love and support that carry families forward when a parent no longer can.

The Ball was co-chaired by Angie and Wes Breton and Drs. Carrie and Vijay Thangamani. Their leadership, along with the dedication of the event committee made this incredibly successful event possible. The evening was also made possible through the generosity of sponsors, including Presenting Sponsor Burke Beverage, whose support played an essential role in the event's success.





Meet Our Experts

Mike Tilden

Engagement and
Education Manager

For Mike Tilden, joining Wellness House was about doing work that genuinely matters. With a background in education and community engagement, he has always been drawn to roles that center people, connection, and service. After earning a degree in history from Saint Michael’s College in Vermont, Mike spent several years working in health education and youth ministry. Those experiences shaped the thoughtful, collaborative approach he brings to his work every day.

Cancer has also touched Mike’s life personally. He lost both his father and his father-in-law to cancer, experiences that deeply inform his commitment to supporting individuals and families facing similar journeys. “Wellness House felt like exactly the kind of place where I could do work that’s meaningful and important,” Mike shares. “It’s a way to honor the people I’ve lost while supporting others through something incredibly hard.”

In his role as Engagement and Education Manager, Mike supports several core areas of Wellness House programming. He helps coordinate the Information and Education program area, working closely with medical experts to ensure participants receive accurate, empowering information they can trust as they make decisions about their care. He also oversees the Unique Boutique, partnering with a dedicated group of volunteers who provide wigs, haircuts, massage, energy healing, and acupuncture. These services help participants feel cared for not just medically, but personally and emotionally, throughout treatment.

While much of Mike’s work happens behind the scenes, listening to participants is one of the most meaningful parts of his role. “Hearing what people need and figuring out how we can respond is what makes the work rewarding,” he says. “It’s about meeting people where they are.”

One moment that stands out for Mike was his first Walk for Wellness House. Watching thousands of people gather before dawn, united by a shared mission, left a lasting impression. Seeing a sea of blue shirts moving together in support of cancer programming was, as he describes it, “awe-inspiring.” It was a powerful reminder of the community that surrounds every participant who walks through the doors of Wellness House.

A KITCHEN REFRESHED BY COMMUNITY, BUILT FOR HEALING

At Wellness House, the kitchen is one of the most active spaces in the Home of Hope. It supports nutrition programs and hands-on classes where participants impacted by cancer learn practical ways to nourish their bodies during treatment and recovery.

For many, nutrition can be a key part of care, helping participants feel stronger, more confident, and better supported during a difficult time.



After more than 20 years of daily use, the kitchen was ready for a refresh to better reflect the warmth and care that define Wellness House. Rather than replacing everything, the goal was a thoughtful update that improved functionality and created a more welcoming environment for participants and staff alike. Thanks to the generosity of our community, that vision became a reality.

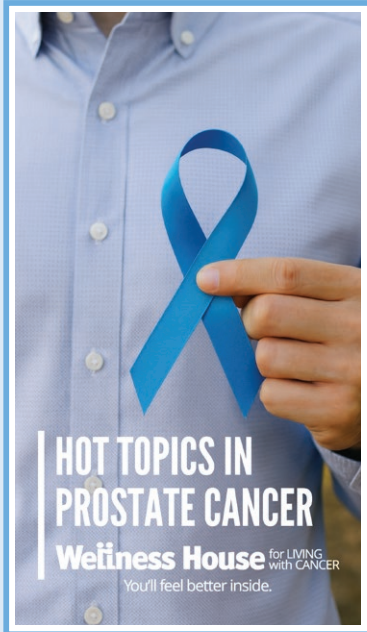
Tony Sarraco of Village Carpentry generously donated his general contracting services and secured significantly reduced pricing on materials. **Interior designer Courtney Casey** contributed her time and expertise, thoughtfully reimagining the space with durable finishes, improved lighting, updated appliances, and a fresh, inviting feel. Board Member Briana Brandt Murray helped connect Wellness House with these partners, ensuring the project was guided by professionals who understood both the mission and the people it serves. Their generosity, care, and belief in the mission made this transformation possible.

The transformation was completed with great care. Contractors worked evenings and weekends to minimize disruption to programs, demonstrating a deep respect for the participants who rely on this space every day and ensuring the kitchen remained safe and welcoming throughout the process.

Because of donated services and in-kind contributions, the total cost of the project was reduced by an estimated 50 percent. These savings allow Wellness House to direct more resources toward free, evidence-based programs that support individuals and families impacted by cancer.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Expert Voices, Informed Choices: HOT TOPICS IN PROSTATE CANCER



On September 27, Wellness House welcomed 105 individuals and families to its annual Hot Topics in Prostate Cancer program, marking the largest turnout in the history of this event. Designed to support people navigating a prostate cancer diagnosis, the program offered clear, expert-led guidance to help participants make informed and confident decisions about their care.

Participants heard directly from leading specialists across the Chicago area, including **Russel Szmulewitz, MD** of **UChicago Medicine**, **Neil Das Gupta, MD** of **Edward Elmhurst HealthCare**, and **Karyn Holtz, PT, MHS, CT, CDNT** of **Rush Physical Therapy**. Surgical perspectives were shared by **Steven B. Brandes, MD**, **Amit R. Patel, MD**, and **Ranko Miocinovic, MD** of **Duly Health and Care**.



Alongside the in-person prostate cancer programming, participants also had the opportunity to join an online nutrition session with **Jamie Shifley, MS, RDN, LDN** of Wellness House.

Throughout the day, participants were able to ask questions, engage directly with trusted experts, and connect with others facing similar decisions. The record-breaking attendance reflected both the need for this information and the value of receiving it in a compassionate, welcoming environment.

Made possible through donor generosity, Hot Topics programs remove barriers to critical education and empower individuals and families during pivotal moments in their cancer journey. This event is part of a four-part annual series that also includes Hot Topics in breast, blood, and colorectal cancer.



All Aboard for Holiday Joy: Polar Express Brings Seasonal Magic to Families

The spirit of the season filled **Wellness House** on December 8 during the annual **Polar Express Winter Wonderland**, a beloved holiday tradition for children and families impacted by cancer. This year's celebration welcomed a record-breaking **155 attendees**, bringing laughter, warmth, and joy to every corner of the House.

Families enjoyed a festive evening with winter-themed games, cozy treats, hands-on holiday crafts, a cheerful photo booth with take-home keepsakes, and a magical visit from Santa himself. Every child received a special gift, generously provided by **Cal's Angels**. The event was also supported by a contribution from **Retirement Planners International**, helping make the evening possible.

For families navigating the challenges of cancer, Polar Express offers more than holiday fun. It creates a moment of togetherness, normalcy, and delight during a difficult journey. Thanks to donor support, Wellness House continues to offer free, meaningful experiences like this each year, bringing comfort, connection, and a bit of seasonal magic when it is needed most.

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

New Tax Opportunities in 2026

Charitable giving has long been a key part of thoughtful financial planning, but historically, tax benefits were largely limited to those who itemized deductions. Beginning in 2026, policy changes introduced a new universal charitable deduction allowing non-itemizers to receive a tax benefit for qualified charitable contributions.

An estimated 90% of taxpayers take the standard deduction, according to the Wall Street Journal. This trend started in 2017 when the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act doubled the standard deduction. This means gifts that don't exceed several thousand dollars often were not able to help you from a tax-standpoint.

Under current federal policy changes scheduled for 2026, **non-itemizers can deduct up to \$1,000 for single filers and \$2,000 for married couples filing jointly, which directly reduces taxable income without having to itemize.**

This shift creates a meaningful planning opportunity for households that typically take the standard deduction, making charitable giving more accessible and tax-efficient for a broader range of families.

As tax policy evolves, proactive planning matters. Supporting Wellness House in 2026 isn't just a charitable decision; it's an opportunity to align generosity with smart tax strategy while helping families impacted by cancer when they need it most. Talk with your tax or finance professional to better understand how to make the most of your gifting.

Questions? Please email David Blaydes at davidb@rpiplan.com or call him at 630-778-8100 x100.

Act now to get a head start on your year-end gift to Wellness House. For more information, visit wellnesshouse.org/planned-giving, or call us at **630-654-5108** for stock transfer instructions.

Thank you to our generous grantors:

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