

Justine's Story

When the Science Became Personal. Page 3



Dear Friends,

As more people live longer with and beyond cancer, “Light the Way” reflects the work ahead for Wellness House. Advances in treatment are extending survivorship, creating a longer and often more complex chapter of life in which support remains essential. The need for care does not end when treatment does. People continue to navigate side effects, changing relationships, returning to work, fear of recurrence, and the challenge of learning how to live well in a life altered by cancer. As more people enter this chapter, Wellness House must be ready to meet them.

Your generosity is what allows us to rise to that need. Each month, Wellness House offers more than 530 programs at no cost, providing evidence-based supportive oncology that cares for the whole person. Our programs help people regain strength, understand what is happening to them, find steadiness when life feels uncertain and connect with others who understand. As cancer care advances, our responsibility is to make sure the support surrounding people advances with it, reaching more individuals and families throughout Chicagoland and beyond.

Justine’s story, featured in this issue, brings this changing landscape into sharp focus. A scientist trained in pharmacology, she had spent years studying cancer and understanding the evidence behind its treatment when, at 37, breast cancer became deeply personal. Her experience also revealed how much of living with cancer continues beyond the treatment room, particularly in survivorship, when the medical urgency may recede but the work of healing continues. Wellness House became part of that next chapter. “Wellness House has been an important part of my healing, helping me move forward and live a full life with my children,” she shares.

Today, Justine carries some of that light forward herself. Drawing on both her scientific knowledge and lived experience, she shares her cancer story publicly on Instagram to help others better understand their options and advocate for themselves. In doing so, she offers another person a clearer path through territory she once had to navigate herself. That is Light the Way in its most human form.

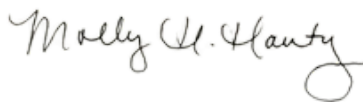
We saw the power of this community in May, when 3,500 people gathered for the largest Walk for Wellness House in our history and helped raise a record amount to sustain free cancer support. That extraordinary response showed what is possible when people choose to stand behind this mission.

On October 24, we will gather again at The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago for the 2026 Light the Way Wellness House Ball. We hope you will join us. Your support of the Ball helps ensure that as more people live longer with cancer, Wellness House can be there with the whole-person care they need to live those years more fully.

Thank you for your partnership in carrying this work forward and for making sure that as cancer changes people’s lives, they do not have to navigate what comes next alone.



Lisa K. Kolavennu, MA, LCPC
Chief Executive Officer



Molly Haunty
Board Chair

VOLUNTEER NEEDS

Front Desk Volunteers

We are always looking for individuals who are interested in providing exceptional customer service by being warm, welcoming and focused on building relationships with our participants, staff and the broader Wellness House community. Please reach out if you are interested in greeting and assisting participants and visitors when they enter the house and programs.

Weekly or every-other-week front desk shifts are available at the following times:

Mondays – Thursdays:

9:00 am - 12:00 pm

12:00 - 4:00 pm

4:00 - 7:30 pm

Fridays:

9:00 am - 12:00 pm

12:00 - 2:00 pm

2:00 - 5:00 pm

Saturdays:

9:00 am - 12:00 pm

The Courtyard Volunteers

The Courtyard, our local consignment and retail store, sells a variety of fine furnishings, with all proceeds benefiting Wellness House. Volunteers can help customers, create eye-catching displays or provide retail and computer support. Shifts are 3-4 hours long, with a commitment of weekly shifts or 1 to 2 shifts per month.

Program Facilitators

Help us empower and support Wellness House participants. We’re looking for professional Massage Therapists, Reiki or Energy Touch Healers, or Yoga or Tai Chi instructors.

If you are interested in signing up for any of these volunteer opportunities or would like to learn more, please scan the QR code:





“Wellness House has been an important part of my healing, helping me move forward and live a full life with my children.”

—Justine

Justine's Story

Justine had spent years studying cancer and how it might be treated with medicines. A PhD scientist trained in pharmacology, she studied how cancer cells work and how to target them. She then built a career in medical communications, translating complex science into clear information that could educate others. Then, at 37, Justine found a change in her left breast and entered the world she had spent years studying and describing from the other side.

She was diagnosed with lobular breast cancer, a form that grows differently from the more familiar lump she had known to look for and can be harder to detect. Suddenly, the medical language she had spent years working with belonged to her own body, and every conversation about what came next carried consequences that were deeply personal.

“There were many times when I was having conversations with my doctors that I had to remind myself that I actually was the patient,” Justine says. “It wasn’t just

interesting science that I was learning about. I was actually going through this.”

Her expertise helped her ask questions and understand the choices available to her. She sought second opinions and ultimately enrolled in a clinical trial, followed by surgery and radiation. Yet beneath all the information was a question that no scientific paper could answer.

Justine and her husband, Domenick, have four children, all of whom were young when she was diagnosed. She thought about graduations and the lives they had not yet lived. She imagined becoming a grandmother someday. “That was the biggest grief that I held,” she says. “Am I going to be there for my children?”

Cancer rearranged life inside their home, and Domenick became an even steadier presence throughout her treatment, accompanying her to infusions and caring for her through post-surgery recovery. On the days when treatment left Justine without much energy, the children came into her room and watched movies or ate

breakfast with her in bed. Her oldest son, Nicco, who lives with type 1 diabetes, understood the difficulty of needles and treatment in a way that surprised them both. “Mom, you got this,” he told her. Cancer brought their family closer together and helped them focus on what mattered most: being there for one another.

Justine focused on getting through treatment, assuming that the hardest part would ease once it was over. Instead, she found survivorship unexpectedly difficult. “The physical part, the treatment, was actually easier than the post-treatment phase,” she says. “You go through this in survival mode, and then you realize you’re never the same person.”

She remained on long-term medications to reduce her risk of recurrence, bringing side effects and what she calls the “invisible load” of cancer into everyday life. To the outside world she looked well. Inside, she was trying to understand the person who had emerged from the experience and the life she wanted to build around her.



A friend who had experienced breast cancer encouraged her to connect with Wellness House. In survivorship, Justine found that the hardest part was not necessarily the treatment itself, but what came after. She knew she needed more support as she learned how to live in a body and a life that no longer felt quite the same.

She began attending the Young Cancer Survivors Support Group, hoping to find the sense of community she had been missing. The people she met had different diagnoses and treatment histories, but they understood the parts of survivorship that were harder to explain elsewhere, including what it meant to return to work or to have relationships shift after cancer. They also understood the disorienting expectation that once treatment ends, life should simply resume as before. “I started to realize that I’m less alone in what I’m going through,” Justine says.

She also began attending mindfulness programs at Wellness House. During one session, instructor Angela led the group through a body scan, asking them to turn their attention inward. Justine had been managing medication side effects and considerable stress at work, but she had continued moving through her days as she always had. In the quiet of that room, she realized how much she was carrying, and the emotions overwhelmed her. “I had a good cry,” she says. “It helped me

understand that I was carrying a lot more than I realized.”

The experience followed her beyond the meditation room. Justine contacted her oncologist and began a conversation about the side effects she had been enduring and what could be changed to improve her quality of life.

For a scientist who believes deeply in evidence-based medicine, this is part of what makes Wellness House meaningful. Medical care treated her cancer. Wellness House gives her room to attend to the whole life surrounding it. She comes for community and mindfulness, but also for educational programs where leading experts discuss advances in cancer care. She can choose what she needs depending on where she is that day.

Her children are beginning to understand Wellness House as well. They have come to family events and Kids Kamp, and they recognize Wellness House simply as “the house where Mom goes.” Justine has told them why it matters to her and that it can be a place for them, too.

The life she is building now contains more room for presence. Before cancer, Justine says, she was always moving toward whatever came next. Treatment forced her to slow down, and survivorship has taught her to keep some of that stillness.

Recently, she took one of her daughters

to Paris, a trip that might once have remained indefinitely in the category of “someday.” Now the decision feels easier. “Why wait?”

Justine still believes deeply in the power of knowledge; she has built her life and career around it. Cancer widened that understanding by teaching her to listen to her body as carefully as she listens to data, and to find wisdom in the company of people who have lived through something similar.

That instinct to translate what she has learned has followed her beyond her professional life. On Instagram, Justine shares her experience of cancer from the patient side, drawing on both her scientific background and what she has lived through to help others better understand their options and feel more confident advocating for themselves. Storytelling, she says, is how people make sense of complicated things. In sharing her own story, she hopes to light the way for someone who may still be trying to find theirs.

At Wellness House, Justine found a community that could meet her in the uncertain territory after treatment and help her discover how she wanted to live within it. Now she is carrying some of that understanding forward. “Wellness House has been an important part of my healing, helping me move forward and live a full life with my children.”

COMMUNITY SHINES AT THE WALK FOR WELLNESS HOUSE

Supporting Cancer Patients and Families #EveryStepoftheWay



Wellness House welcomed 3,500 participants to its annual Walk for Wellness House on Sunday, May 3, at the Kay and Mike Birck Home of Hope in Hinsdale. Survivors, families, friends, teams, volunteers, community members and donors came together in a powerful show of support, raising a record amount of funds to ensure free cancer support programs remain accessible to all who need them.

Greg Dutra, meteorologist with ABC7 Chicago and Good Morning America, led the way by serving as master of ceremonies along with special announcer **Dan Wagner**, Senior Vice President, Government Relations with The Inland Real Estate Group of Companies, Inc.

Led by Co-Chairs and Wellness House Board Members **Julie Thick** and **Thomas Cranmer**, the Walk featured a 3K walk and 5K run through northeast Hinsdale, along with family-friendly activities and



opportunities for participants of all ages to engage in a special day of connection and purpose.

A special thank you to Presenting Sponsor, **The Inland Real Estate Group of Companies, Inc.**, and Platinum Sponsors, **Chicago Title Insurance Company**, **Hallstar**, and the **Ramon**

Bueno Cancer Support Foundation for their continued leadership and commitment to ensuring that no one faces cancer alone. Thank you to all teams, with special thanks to the top five fundraising teams, **THECROWNROYALSTEAM**, **Team Inland**, **Hallstar Hustlers**, **The Beautiful Badass** and **Wellness Warriors**.

Save the date! Next year's Walk for Wellness House is on Sunday, May 2, 2027

LIGHT THE WAY: WELLNESS HOUSE BALL

One of our biggest fundraisers of the year is just around the corner. Wellness House will host **Light the Way**, our annual Ball, on Saturday, Oct. 24, 2026, at The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago. The evening will shine a light on the philosophy at the heart of our mission that no one should face cancer alone. Light the Way reflects the guiding role Wellness House plays in helping people navigate the emotional, physical and deeply personal challenges of cancer.

Light the Way will shape the evening from the moment guests arrive, creating an elegant setting for the cocktail reception, dinner, live and silent auctions, program and dancing. Proceeds will directly support the more than 530 programs Wellness House offers each month at no cost to participants.

We are grateful for the support of this year's Ball Chairs, **Dr. Angela Crowley** and **Dr. R. Webster Crowley**; **Jennifer Carmody Haunty** and **Jake Haunty**; and **Dr. Gale England Smith** and **Stephen Smith**, as well as our committee members and generous sponsors.

A special thank you to Presenting Sponsor **Burke Beverage**; Premier Sponsors **Tony & Mary Ann Pasquinelli Foundation** and **UBS**; and Gold Sponsors **Advocate Health Care**, **Curi Capital**, **Hallstar**, **UChicago Medicine**, **AdventHealth** and **William Blair**.

You can Light the Way by joining us for the Ball, an evening that helps sustain free cancer support for individuals and families throughout the year.



Want to attend the Ball? Learn more at wellnesshouse.org/ball



Meet Our Experts: Lexie Barber, MS, CCLS

Oncology Child and Family Specialist

Lexie Barber helps children and families make sense of the ways cancer can change daily life. Through individual sessions, support groups, special events, and parent education, she gives families space to ask questions, connect with others, and feel supported in ways that meet them where they are.

Lexie joined Wellness House in December 2025 after working as a child life specialist in the emergency room of a Level I trauma center in downtown Chicago. She originally thought she would become a doctor, but while studying medicine, she realized she was more interested in supporting people through the experience of illness than in medicine itself.

At Wellness House, no two days look quite the same. Lexie may spend the start of her day connecting with parents and preparing activities for children, then spend the afternoon and evening leading individual sessions, support groups or family programs. Each session is tailored to what a child is experiencing and needs at that moment.

At the heart of Lexie's work is a simple goal of making sure children know Wellness House is a place for them, too.

"I want all kids who walk through our doors to know that there's support for them, not just their family members," she says.

That includes helping children find peers who understand what they're going through and a place where they can feel comfortable being themselves.

Lexie saw that sense of belonging come to life during this year's Kids Kamp, where more than 40 children gathered.

During Field Day, some children became overwhelmed and needed to slow down. What stayed with Lexie was how naturally the other kids adjusted and supported them.

"None of the kids are frustrated with them because everyone understands," she says.

"They've all had this experience of cancer where sometimes you have to take it slower."

For Lexie, that instinctive understanding is part of what makes Wellness House different. She sees it in the friendships that form among the children and in the relationships their parents build with one another.

Outside of Wellness House, Lexie is pursuing her master's degree in social work and completing an internship in play therapy. She enjoys musical theater, Love Island UK, needlepoint, exercise, cooking and exploring Chicago.

UNIQUE WAYS TO GIVE TO WELLNESS HOUSE

KNAULLAPALOOZA

Thank you to the Knaul family for choosing Wellness House as a beneficiary of this year's 5th Annual Knaullapalooza Memorial Golf Outing.

Each year since Kevin Knaul's passing, Tiffany Knaul has organized Knaullapalooza in honor of Kevin and the things he loved, selecting organizations that were meaningful to him as beneficiaries.

This year also marks the 10th anniversary of Kevin and Tiffany Knaul serving as Chairs of the Wellness House Ball, a reminder of their commitment to ensuring individuals and families affected by cancer have access to compassionate support.

Proceeds from Knaullapalooza 2026 will fund Wellness House breast cancer programs, helping provide education, emotional support, nutrition, exercise, stress management, and counseling at no cost to those navigating cancer.



To Tiffany, the Knaul family, Tee It Up For KK, the sponsors, volunteers, golfers, and everyone who made this event possible, thank you. Your generosity and commitment to honoring Kevin's legacy will make a meaningful difference for countless individuals and families.

WIGGLETZ FOR KIDS KAMP

Thank you to three amazing students from Oak School in Hinsdale, Lia, Juliana, and Rafaela, who helped raise funds for Kids Kamp. Earlier this year, the girls created a project through their school's Kids Care Club to raise money for camp supplies. They sold Wiggletz after school.

Their compassion, determination, and generosity are inspiring, and we're so proud of everything they've accomplished. Thank you, Lia, Juliana, and Rafaela, for helping bring smiles, creativity, and fun to the children attending Kids Kamp this year.



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

HOPE SOCIAL

The weather couldn't have been better on June 4, when around 200 people gathered at Wellness House for Hope Social, our annual community picnic. It was a chance for participants, families, staff, and friends to spend time celebrating the community that makes Wellness House so special.

There was plenty happening throughout the evening. The Wellness House Flute Circle performed, along with a local teen guitarist who added even more live music to the festivities. Guests enjoyed food and ice cream, while kids bounced in the bounce house, created crafts, and watched a balloon artist work his magic.

With good food, music, and activities, Hope Social gave everyone a chance to celebrate the connections built at Wellness House.



MIND BODY FEST

This May, Wellness House hosted two Mind Body Fest events, offering relaxing and restorative experiences for anyone impacted by cancer and their loved ones. Both events gave participants the opportunity to try short, guided sessions featuring a variety of stress-relieving mind-body practices.

On Saturday, May 16, around 150 participants gathered at Wellness House in Hinsdale to explore yoga and chair yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi, expressive arts, Reiki, breathwork, meditation, and more. Children joined in the fun, too, with a special Kids Corner featuring crafts and activities.

Mind Body Fest continued on Wednesday, May 20, at Malcolm X College in Chicago, where nearly 25 participants heard from Dr. Jaime Lewis, a dual board-certified physician in lifestyle medicine and palliative medicine and a certified yoga therapist. Dr. Lewis shared insights into the difference between everyday tiredness and cancer-related fatigue, along with strategies to better understand and manage fatigue.

After the presentation, participants had the chance to put some of those mind-body practices into action with sessions including Tai Chi, breathwork, and therapeutic yoga for stress relief.

Together, the two events offered participants a chance to slow down, try something new, and discover practical ways to manage stress and support their well-being.



KIDS KAMP

This July, Wellness House welcomed more than 40 campers each day for a week of creativity, laughter, and friendship at Kids Kamp 2026. Each morning, kids gathered for activities designed to build confidence, spark some fun, and connect with others who understand what it's like to have cancer affect their family.

The week kicked off with tie-dye T-shirts and get-to-know-you games, followed by a visit from The Little Red Schoolhouse for a special activity all about birds. Midweek brought some friendly competition during Field Day, complete with tug-of-war, sack races, and egg-and-spoon relays. Dr. Lexie Von Boom, aka Oncology Child and Family Specialist Lexie Barber, kept everyone entertained with Mad Science. Campers also learned about nutrition, welcomed a visit from Kids Kicking Cancer, and got creative painting canvas bags.

The week wrapped up with water games, a foam party, and the always-anticipated Kamper Variety Show, where families joined us to cheer on the performers.



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

GIVE BEFORE YEAR-END AND MAKE YOUR GIFT GO FURTHER

As the year comes to a close, consider making a year-end gift to your favorite charity, including Wellness House. Your generosity can make a difference in our mission, and it may also provide you a tax benefit.

For 2026, taxpayers who itemize deductions may be able to deduct qualifying charitable contributions on their federal tax returns. A new rule also allows taxpayers who do not itemize to deduct up to \$1,000 in qualifying cash contributions (\$2,000 for married couples filing jointly), subject to IRS rules. Gifting appreciated securities allows you to claim a charitable deduction while also potentially avoiding capital gains tax on the appreciation.

To receive a potential 2026 tax benefit, your contribution generally must be made by December 31, 2026. Cash gifts, checks and credit-card donations generally count in the year they are made. Be sure to keep a bank record or written acknowledgment from the charity showing the date and amount of your gift.

If you make your gift to Wellness House, you can designate which program you would like your donation to support.



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