

Faces of Courage Provides a Free Haven for Cancer Patients

Written By
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2322 Words

If you know nothing about the non-profit organization, Faces of Courage, you are not alone. If you do recognize the name, consider yourself blessed. It's very likely that you, your child or another loved one has had their world turned upside down by cancer and Faces of Courage was there to help you through.

Founder Peggie Sherry says that most people only discover Faces of Courage when they've been diagnosed. The job, she says is "her greatest joy and greatest sorrow." She's gained a wealth of friendships, but it's the other side of the organization that would break even the strongest person. "When you bury a five year old," says Sherry. "That's when you wonder how you do this." She points to a photo of herself, two smiling youngsters and a counselor at Disney World. "They were in remission then." The words hover in the air; she is momentarily lost in memory. "They've passed."

Her office is creative clutter of multi-colored stuffed animals, pink flamingos, inspirational messages, photos, greeting cards, thank you cards, letters of gratitude, silly sayings, and metallic and sculptured angels and wind chimes, deeply contrasted by obituaries, photos, and clippings about the deceased women and children that have permanently touched her life.

Sherry is no stranger to the disease. A two-time cancer survivor herself, she is an amazing woman, an immaculately coifed, motorcycle-riding bundle of energy and enthusiasm for the work that she does, even after the passage of 60 hours in her average work week.

When asked how Faces of Courage came to exist, she explained that she was the director for a similar organization since 1997 that closed their doors shortly after hearing Sherry's own second cancer diagnosis. "When I was diagnosed the second time, the powers that be came down from New York and said we don't think while you are going through treatment that you can run this program. We're closing the doors in Florida." This left 700 families without a place to escape from the disease. Email after email begged her to continue the program. "These were now my families and my friends and they were telling me we don't care what the name on the door is, we just want to continue the program."

In January 2004, using \$110,000 of personal funds and a donation by TransWorld, Sherry opened the doors of Faces of Courage. "Skip Glass of TransWorld said we will give you free space, internet connection, parking, meeting rooms, volunteers, furniture, whatever you need forever free if you will just open a new non-profit."

Faces of Courage is not a support group, though it works with support groups and it does provide one-on-one counseling for cancer survivors; instead it provides a free retreat for women and children to forget about the upheaval in their lives and simply have a good time. Says Sherry, "Our motto is cancer is serious; Camp is serious fun!"

Faces of Courage provides a free, safe, normal place that is medically supervised for women and children that deserve that little bit of normalcy in their lives. Hosted at the Rotary Camp in Brandon on eighteen acres, three separate camps allow women and children to catch up on quality play time. At the children's camp, patients and their well siblings can indulge in everything from arts and crafts to sports, golfing, kayaking, fishing, archery and egg tossing to wrapping counselors in toilet paper. "Once the counselors are completely immobile, we give the kids can of shaving cream," says Sherry.

December 5th through 7th brings a very special event: Santa's Workshop. This year, 80 children will be partnered with 200 volunteers. The weekend event allows children, ages three to fourteen, to receive Santa bucks at camp and get the opportunity to purchase presents for Mom, Dad and other relatives for Christmas and let volunteer "elves" do the wrapping. This is the place where an ice cream social, campfire sing-a-longs, movie night and a visit from Santa himself replaces chemotherapy and blood draws, and the volunteer doctors and nurses don shorts and sandals; where a trick motorcyclist performs and the fire station brings a fire truck, a helicopter flies in and the kids are visited by the Rough Riders. This is the camp that laughing kids and their volunteer buddies build, design and decorate cardboard kayaks and the littlest campers get to race them safely across the lake and the biggest volunteer is cheered on while he sits inside the kayak afterwards... and sinks. This is the home away where a poignant, bittersweet ceremony honors the campers that are no longer here and releases a rainbow of butterflies into the sky in their memory. "There's a poem we read that when a caterpillar dies than the world sees a butterfly and it's the transition from this world to the next. Then they release the butterflies and the butterflies come and kiss the kids, land on their hair and hands. It's very touching to see. Parents just start to bawl because it's so beautiful. It's hard because we are a cancer camp and we lose at least seven children a year. Death is a real thing. We are losing kids every year."

When asked how she separates herself from the heart-wrenching side of the organization, Sherry answers with a story. "When I visited another camp, I asked a long-time volunteer how she does this without crying all the time. She said that you get to a point where it doesn't matter when people see you cry because if you stop crying, you don't care and you've got to get out of it."

Sherry explains further, "It's such a joy when you see a child who's been bald for years and years, who's now back and full of hair, off chemo, no cord, with a clean bill of health and it's seven years later and they are now a counselor with you. I have a three-time

Leukemia cancer survivor who flies in from Connecticut to be a counselor at our camp. He would never miss it.”

“We buried a little boy this year and my counselors are so wonderful. They really did a death vigil at a child’s home and when he went to hospice and sat with that family until that child passed and they check on the family still.”

And anyone can volunteer. They simply need to contact Sherry by going to the website, www.facesofcourage.com and signing up to join the email list. Six hundred people have answered the call to help 2,900 families since 2004. Young, old, parents, students needing volunteer hours for college scholarships, people from all walks of life realize the impact that volunteering with this organization makes on both themselves and the campers.

In addition to the children’s camp, Faces of Courage hosts a woman’s program and a specialized woman of color program. Upon arrival, camping guests are greeted to a wine and cheese social, an opportunity to meet and socialize with other women facing the same obstacles head-on. The next day is a day of pampering. “We do makeovers, hair, nails, eye brows. We do tie-dye, water aerobics, archery, fishing, canoeing, walking, dominos, cards, movie night, tai chi, yoga, exercise, ice cream socials, Pop Hop (dancing on a bubble-wrapped dance floor). We bring out tarot card readers, psychics and guest speakers. More importantly, we do straight talk about cancer. We bring volunteer doctors and nurses out. No PowerPoint presentations, no white coats, just jeans, shorts, tennis shoes – they sit in a room and we let the women ask them any question that they want and that can go on forever. At the end of camp, we do the butterfly release.”

The main difference between the women camp and women of color camp is additional events: a fashion show, hat creation, and head piece wrapping demonstrations, and delicious ethnic cooking. “We are the first in the nation to do a woman of color program that is open to any black woman who has had any type of cancer at any time. We deal with just black issues, social issues that are applicable to only the African-American society.”

Both camps play host to a Saturday evening Death by Chocolate celebration. Two ten foot tables are filled with chocolate of every kind: chocolate bars, pies, cakes, fountains. “A high-end cake company donates spectacular cakes for our Death by Chocolate party,” says Sherry.

When asked for something unexpected gained from helming this organization, Sherry tells a story of a camper who arrived in a foul mood and by the end of camp was hugging and crying like everyone else. The woman called Sherry six months later and explained the extenuating circumstances; she’d been told to go to camp by both her doctor and her husband and she adamantly refused. Tricked by her husband, dropped off with nothing but her suitcase at camp, her cell phone, purse and money were taken;

she had no choice but participate. Her husband had secretly registered her for the camp and was going on a business trip that weekend. “What her husband didn’t know is when he left for that business trip, she was planning on committing suicide. She’d already written the note because she couldn’t live with the cancer anymore. She said I saved her life.”

Sherry’s next goal is to open a second location of Faces of Courage in Michigan. “We want to put this organization into other locations. We also are looking to branch out into prostate cancer. Since most men won’t do camps, I’m looking for a sponsor to take them deep sea fishing and during the two hours they are out at sea, I want to bring doctors in to answer their questions, bring surgeons and radiologists to talk about seed implants and the after effects. I give them beer and pizza and after two hours, maybe they will bond with each other.”

In addition to the camps, Faces of Courage offers an outreach education program. Every two years they do a Polka Dot tour, a group of motorcycles and rvs that tour the state of Florida “bringing breast cancer awareness to the street level.” They visit high schools, colleges, support groups, hospitals and talk about breast cancer. “Last year we drove 1800 miles in seven days, up to 6 events a day.” They bring a beautiful black and white photo gallery of breast cancer survivors proudly displaying their scars. “It’s called Unveiling Breast Cancer and we getting ready in 2009 to take it to Tallahassee for a joint caucus event. These images demonstrate that men get breast cancer, that African-Americans get breast cancer, that Olympiads get breast cancer – that everyone, every age, every stage in life gets breast cancer.”

Unveiling Breast Cancer takes the shame away from saying I have cancer. “It isn’t like you were out in the street doing something bad and you got breast cancer. It isn’t something that needs to be said in whispers, in hushed tones. We wanted our images to show you know what; this is what breast cancer looks like – men, women and children going through hell with a smile on their face. They just happened to have a gene that went crazy.”

Long term, Sherry’s next big project is creating a Lamaze for Cancer, twelve one-hour videos that take the fear out of cancer. They will walk the viewer through each phase. “Normal isn’t normal anymore. There are steps to take to understand the new normal. It will start with how do process the words you have cancer; how do you put together your medical team; who on your team makes the decisions; does everyone know what drugs you’ve been given because everyone is giving you a different drug; when can you say no I don’t want to do that and when do you have to do it; what are the side effects of chemotherapy; how do you deal with your friends who are grieving in front of you and you have to support them; how do you deal with people shunning you; how you deal with the insurance company that turns down everything; how do you deal with out of network – did you know that even though the hospital may be on your plan, the anesthesiologist who knocks you out for your cancer surgery is not? Every single person

in that hospital is an independent provider and they have to be on your plan or you will be paying forty percent, not twenty percent.” Sherry pauses to catch her breath, “Not only are you worried about living through this, paying for this without bankruptcy --- a chemo bag can be \$13,000 a bag and they do children’s chemo once a week for two years. You’re paying twenty percent and your co-pay and your doctor wants you in five days a week for blood tests and scans and every time you go in, it’s a co-pay.”

It’s those type of issues Sherry wants to put on video available to anyone to take the fear and anguish out of cancer so that a person can focus on getting better. Sherry summarizes, “We are a free small non-profit that a lot of people have never heard of, but thank goodness, you haven’t... because when you hear my name that means you or your child has heard the words you have cancer. Nobody knows until the one day you open that dark door and we’re here going hi. We live in this world every day. Every call I have is I or my child has cancer, but as a survivor, I understand it. They become warriors on a battlefield and we are in the battle right beside them. If we can relieve just one little bit of fear and terror associated with this disease, than we are doing exactly what we are here to do.”

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