

The History of the Center for Cancer Support & Education: An interview with Mary Lewis Sheehan

So others could better understand the work of the Center for cancer Support & Education, we wanted to share a brief history of the organization - how it began and where it is now.

In the early 1990s, Mary Lewis Sheehan, RN, CNS-BC was asked by the Chief Nursing Officer of Symmes Hospital to create a Breast Cancer Support Group. Mary Lewis recalls seeking out a renowned psychologist who specialized in cancer work for consultation on how to proceed. She laughs now when she recalls that she was told that she should not do so, supposedly because she did not know how and could not possibly understand this deep work. "That was 17 years ago, and I guess I figured it out."

Using her background as a psychiatric nurse clinical specialist, she initiated the Breast Cancer Support Group in November 1993. Initially, the group met at Symmes Hospital in Arlington until the hospital closed. Mary Lewis commented that "we even continued to meet in the building for months after it closed! We had no other home yet."

Symmes Hospital was purchased prior to this by Lahey Clinic, who assumed the funding for the group and whose sponsorship allowed for its continuance. The Breast Cancer Support Group moved to its current home in 2006, as a program of The Center for Cancer Support & Education, 180 Mass. Ave in Arlington.

The Breast Cancer Support Group began meeting every week without fail on Tuesday afternoons for seventeen years. Mary Lewis believes that steadfastness, empathy, and humor are key ingredients of any therapeutic cancer experience. The Center for Cancer Support & Education grew from the energy generated by the Breast Cancer Support Group and one pivotal event—the creation of Arms Around Arlington Day.

In 2000, the Youth Risk Behavior survey was conducted by the Board of Youth Services and members of Arlington's Teen Health Council. This survey indicated that significant numbers of teens were highly stressed because of serious illness in their immediate families. As a result, in 2001, Arms Around Arlington I, a day of connection and support for those touched by cancer was born and became a well known event each spring for 6 years. These day-long events held initially at the Arlington Town Hall included speakers, sample support groups, free massage, Chinese herbal and Reiki treatments and booths of information from local hospitals and health care providers. At the end of the day, a needs assessment was conducted in the form of an "Arlington Town Cancer Meeting."

In the first year, the needs assessment led to the formation of a Caregiver Support Group and of Arms Around Arlington, The Center for Cancer Support & Education with Mary Lewis as its co-director. In 2006, the name was adjusted to encompass service to surrounding communities and the name became simply The Center for Cancer Support & Education.

Over time, different support groups and wellness modalities developed at the expressed wishes of those with cancer – patients, family members, and caregivers. The efforts to found a cancer support center were supported by committed and caring people: Cindy Bouvier and Carlene Newell of the Arlington Public Schools and John Jope, Director of the Council on Aging who stated “I’m going to help you” and provided a home complete with friends for a few years starting out. Evelyn Smith DeMille and Vicky Palmer Erbs of the The Elizabeth and George L. Sanborn Foundation for the Treatment and Cure of Cancer became a lifeline for the developing organization, supplying not only funding but hope, faith and mentoring.

The formation of The Center for Cancer Support & Education happened in the Arlington community and grew steadily out of the expressed needs of Arlington families touched by cancer in attendance at Arms Around Arlington Day. The Support Program has grown heartily and now includes groups for breast cancer, general cancer, advanced cancer, brain cancer, and family members/ caregivers. The Wellness Program was created in 2006 by Margaret Ryan, an artist, survivor, and Yoga teacher. It includes Polarity Balancing Therapy, Light Massage, Acupressure, Reiki, RYSE Private Therapy Sessions, acupuncture, meditation and a writing group. Wellness scholarships are available paid for by the Wendy Fund which was created in the memory of Wendy Morcos, a wife and mother who died of breast cancer in 2010 at age 48.

Mary Lewis happily aided Joan Driscoll, RN as she assumed the role of President of the Board of Directors in 2009. She continues to lead the Breast Cancer Support Group and takes an active role in the Board. Joan is uniquely positioned to lead the Center on to its next successes, due to her years of leadership positions in health care.

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