

Safety in Numbers - The Wellness Community of Arizona

Written by Christine Whitton

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Cancer, a word so powerful it temporarily paralyses one with fear, levy's hope as its one true salvation.



Each and every one of us has been personally affected in one way or another by cancer. Maybe it's a family member, a friend or even ourselves. No matter the link, it pains us all to no end. For those battling cancer, The Wellness Community of Arizona provides a refuge offering free aid, friendship and support in times of need.

In 1982, Dr. Harold Benjamin, Ph.D., founded Patient Active Concept—a California nonprofit providing emotional and educational support to those with cancer. Behind the scenes, his personal anguish was the driving force: His wife was battling breast cancer. According to The Wellness Community Web site, Dr. Benjamin says, "People with cancer who participate in their fight for recovery from cancer will improve the quality of their life and may enhance the possibility of their recovery. Combining the will of the patient with the skill of the physician is a powerful combination in the fight against the common enemy—cancer!" In 1989, his Cali nonprofit formed The Wellness Community, a national organization allowing it to expand outside California. In 2002, its headquarters relocated to Washington D.C.

Phoenix, one of 26 chapters within The Wellness Community, is located in a historic 100-year-old home. The center's four-pillar program (emotional support; education; nutrition; and exercise and stress management) helps to provide patients with an overall feeling of well-being. But most of all it restores hope. Today, The Wellness Community of Arizona is rounding its 10-year anniversary. And, as it rallies towards another decade of hope, Paula Hardison, executive director for The Wellness Community of Arizona, acknowledges two of the community's many memorable milestones.

- In 2005, The Wellness Community was tallying 4,000 yearly participant visits. By the end of 2009, the community will have reached 14,000 participant visits across four off-site locations. That number exceeds its yearly projection total and puts the organization two years ahead of schedule.
- In 2006, The Wellness Community of Arizona opened the first teenage cancer center (at the request of a family) and launched the organization's first national prototype. Since its inception, 20 children and 70 teenagers from Arizona have entered the facility.

Also joining in the celebrations is Kay Kays, a 10-year cancer survivor. In 1994, Kays was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer—a devastating disease with a 99 percent mortality rate and a four- to six-month prognosis. After entering remission, Kays was faced with a 1999 reoccurrence of pancreatic cancer, followed by her third reoccurrence on her lymph nodes in 2002, and a fourth reoccurrence in her lungs in 2006—each time beating the odds. "I have been very lucky in that there are several kinds of pancreatic cancer and mine is slow-growing," Kays says. "I've dealt with cancer for 15 years. The first five years through faith and hope with my church, but I always felt something was missing. It was not until I found The Wellness Community of Arizona that helped strengthened my hope." Kays says it was the organization's patient-active approach that empowered her to take on her last two bouts of cancer. "Never give up hope, no matter what you hear. Statistics are statistics. I wanted to know what was best for me," Kays says.

Like many cancer patients who sit and reevaluate life's unwarranted plan, Kays jokes of the movie "The Bucket List" starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. And like the movie, she too created a list consisting of learning sign language, teaching for a week, joining the Peace Corps on a mission to Puerto Rico and traveling, all of which she did. Today, at 58 years old, Kays is a cancer research advocate for several local agencies, including the Arizona Cancer Center in Tucson. Her focus is mainly gastrointestinal, but she has been educated on colon and esophageal cancers. "I work with researchers by listening from a patient's point of view. I also get a vote, as a patient, as to what I think their research ranks," Kays says. Beyond that, she welcomes newcomers to The Wellness Center of Arizona. She ends by saying there's no cancer at any stage that someone has not survived from—a poignant line she remembers from the organization's welcome video.

For more information of The Wellness Community, visit www.twccaz.org.