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Her Bag of Tricks Helps Patients Conquer Chemo

by Nancy Sokoler Steiner, Contributing Writer

Shortly after Janet Halbert completed treatment for breast cancer in 2005, a friend was diagnosed with the disease. The friend asked Halbert if she had any tips for easing the chemotherapy experience.

"I told her I had some products and some ideas and things that might be helpful," Halbert said.

During her own therapy, Halbert spent her dwindling energy tracking down over-the-counter products to relieve the side effects of her treatment. She couldn't understand why doctors and nurses didn't just hand out a kit to their patients if they knew the typical side effects and what products helped. Halbert assembled a goodie bag for her friend, which included a toothbrush designed to be gentle on the gums, lotion, a humor book and a list of suggestions.

After putting together several more kits for other acquaintances diagnosed with various forms of cancer, Halbert decided to create 50 bags to give away to friends and friends of friends.

Earlier this year, the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles awarded a \$10,000 grant to Halbert's nonprofit, Hurdle Jumpers, which has enabled her to assemble and distribute an additional 2,000 bags.

"I'm honored to have been recognized by such a well-regarded foundation," said Halbert, who added that the Foundation's acknowledgement was instrumental in helping her obtain two additional grants.

In 2006, Halbert formed Hurdle Jumpers, which provides the kits to help patients "soar over the obstacles of cancer treatment." Like Sharsheret, Gilda's Club and the Wellness Community, the nonprofit exists to provide support to ease cancer treatment's physical and emotional toll.

Halbert hopes to secure additional funding to further expand the Hurdle Jumpers operation by taking her efforts nationwide. The American Cancer Society expects 1.4 million new cancer cases to be diagnosed this year, and Hurdle Jumpers is hoping to meet part of that need in the future by creating and shipping 700,000 kits annually.

In the beginning, Halbert started out by contacting companies and asking them to donate health and beauty products. Before long a second bedroom in her home was stacked with boxes.

The project took on a life of its own as family, friends and colleagues provided their talents, contacts and enthusiasm. A business associate, impressed with her efforts, donated the initial seed capital to get the larger-scale operation running.

Halbert, a CPA who operates her own management-consulting firm, realized she could no longer run the Hurdle Jumpers out of her home when a truck arrived carrying eight pallets of personal care products from the pharmaceutical company Novartis. She rented warehouse space to store the inventory, and recruited students from area schools to

help assemble the kits. (A local business now provides her with free warehouse space, and the kits, which include items donated by 15 different companies, continue to be put together and delivered by volunteers.)

Psychotherapist and Journal contributor Anne Brenner, who was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma, a rare form of cancer, received an early version of Halbert's kit from a colleague.

"The individual items were wonderful, but even more wonderful was the acknowledgement of what chemo is like and the nuances of it," Brenner said.

In addition to 12 personal care products, each chemo care kit includes the book "A Blue Day Book — A Lesson in Cheering Yourself Up" by B.T.Greive, a relaxation CD, a list of Halbert's personal survival tips and a note explaining that the kit was "lovingly assembled by volunteers." There is a smaller version of the kit for those undergoing radiation, and

both kits are provided free of charge. A kit request form is available via the Hurdle Jumper Web site.

"When [a patient's] autonomy, happiness, and coping skills are maximally taxed, along comes this delightful collection of non-medicinal remedies which focus on the baby steps it takes to get over each hurdle on the way to wellness," said Dr. Marjorie B. Fine, chief of surgery at St. Johns Health Center and a member of Hurdle Jumpers' board of health care advisers.

A Southern California native, Halbert describes herself as "a product of the Los Angeles organized Jewish community." She grew up at and is still a member of Temple Beth Am, and participated in Young Judaea, Los Angeles Hebrew High School and the Brandeis Collegiate Institute.

"I grew up in a family where we always talked about politics, community, communal responsibilities and Jewish values," Halbert said.

Later, she chaired the Jewish Federation's Young Leadership Program, and served on the boards of Jewish Family Service, Camp JCA and the Progressive Jewish Alliance, among others. She has been active in political campaigns at the local, state and federal levels.

Her mother died of breast cancer at the age of 49, when Halbert was 11, so she learned at a young age about cancer and the importance of early detection. When Halbert felt a lump during a routine breast self-examination, she knew to take immediate action.

Her yearlong treatment included surgeries, four months of intensive chemotherapy and seven weeks of radiation.

"The whole thing is so overwhelming and exhausting," Halbert said. She created the Hurdle Jumper kits so that "someone who is scared about the uncertainties of cancer treatment will know I made it through and they will also make it through."

Early in her cancer odyssey, "My surgeon told me something good will come from this," Halbert recalled. "She was right."

For more information about Hurdle Jumpers, call (310) 968-4123 or visit jewishjournal.com. ●



Janet Halbert. Photo by Bill Aron