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Women with cancer find SLEW of help

S.A. LIFE/1C

Olga Young



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S.A. Life



Story Tools:

Wellness center helping women cope with cancer

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Susan Weill
San Antonio Express-News

The thought of a third round of chemotherapy was devastating to Blanca Gutierrez.

"I was so depressed to find out my cancer battle wasn't over," the San Antonian says. "I just didn't know how I could get through it."

But then Gutierrez, 47, was referred to the Support Lending for Emotional Well-Being (SLEW) Wellness Center, a volunteer-run organization based in Windsor Park Mall at Interstate 35 and Walzem Road.

"It was magic to my life," she says.

"SLEW was established to help meet the emotional and physical needs of uninsured and low-income women with cancer, and to provide this in one location," says founder Olga Young, herself a cancer survivor.

"During my cancer fight two years ago, I was extremely fortunate," says Young, 47. "I had good health insurance and a good support system, but I still felt tired and frustrated."

Young's cancer journey brought an increased awareness of the struggle faced by the less privileged. When she learned that Texas ranks high for states with a large percentage of medically uninsured women, she was staggered.

"As I got stronger and felt myself recovering, my mission became to help these women," she says. "I can't imagine how difficult it is to face recovery from cancer without financial resources."



(Tom Reel/Express-News)
Olga Young and volunteers (from left) John Braxton, Sue Vander Heyden and Alma Marks work at the SLEW Wellness Center in Windsor Park Mall. Young is the founder of the center, which provides free wigs to women with cancer among numerous other services.

The managers at the Windsor Hill Home Depot were equally impressed. They contributed paint and renovation supplies.

Tony Vander Heyden of Calumet Computers volunteered to rebuild donated computers, design the SLEW Web site and install Internet connections.

"Olga is just a blessing to the community," says Vander Heyden, whose wife, Susan, volunteers at the center.

Beyond provisions from the San Antonio business community, Young sought the backing of City Hall. She made the rounds to promote her cause and all but three of the 10 City Council members agreed to meet with her.

She found advocates in District 2 Councilman Joel Williams and District 5 Councilwoman Patti Radle.

"SLEW has the type of mission that can truly empower women, especially to rise above their circumstances," Williams says.

Radle agrees. "Being faced with cancer is emotionally overwhelming enough without having to worry about finances," she says. "The nurturing and material assistance offered by SLEW is extremely important."

In March, the San Antonio City Council awarded SLEW a \$23,000 grant to help kick-start the organization, which surprised and pleased Young. "Usually they don't provide funds until after an organization has been around for a while."

Young's agreement with the council was that fiscal management of the grant would be handled by the Barrio Comprehensive Family Health Care Center and Barrio's executive director, Debbora Thompson. "SLEW is an extension of the services we provide with breast cancer screening because they take it one step further," Thompson says. "Our programs mesh well."

Remarkably, less than a year after Young set out to create SLEW, it opened in April as an all-inclusive program providing no-cost services such as physical therapy and counseling.

Gutierrez was one of the first women referred to the center.

"I was so depressed about my cancer before I came here," she says. "Just having someone to talk with who's gone through the same thing is saving my life."

Gutierrez is counseled weekly by volunteer Diane Gilliam, a San Antonio social worker.

"I'm a cancer survivor, too," says Gilliam, 57. "It was a dream of mine to work with other cancer patients."

Physical therapy at the wellness center includes a weekly massage, and San Antonio massage therapist John Braxton volunteers.

"Two of my sisters had cancer," he says. "One survived and one didn't. I saw what they went through and I wanted to help others."

Mia Nesbitt is another volunteer massage therapist who comes to the center one day a week.

"I have a family member with cancer," she says. "And I know how much a weekly massage helps her deal with the stress of the disease."

Pat Dilworth has known Young for 25 years and volunteers as a receptionist at the center.

"I saw Olga's cancer battle," says Dilworth. "When I heard about her efforts to create SLEW, I knew I had to help out."

Prosthetic fittings and wigs also are available at the center, and a volunteer manicurist is on duty.

Sandi Stanford of the Alamo Breast Cancer Foundation says SLEW provides much needed services.

"Best of all, they're in one location," she says. "Patients don't have to go all over town to get their needs met."

Transportation to and from the SLEW Wellness Center is offered at no cost by the Ground Angels, a service of the Alamo Area Resource Center, Young says.

"I encourage women with cancer to contact us," she says. "And we welcome volunteers. We especially need Spanish-speakers."

The SLEW Wellness Center is currently open only by appointment. Call (210) 654-7900 for more information and to arrange transportation, or go to their Web site at www.slew inc.org.