

Angels Among Us

Breast Cancer Survivor Gives Back Through UAB's "Angel Squad"

By SARAH KUPER

From her first visit to the oncologist, Kirstin Hoff found herself surrounded by angels.

Volunteers from UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center's Angel Squad program were at her side as she began to understand the treatment plan for her invasive ductile breast cancer.

Now, Hoff is three years cancer-free, and she has found her wings as a member of the Angel Squad.

She began working with the group while she still was being treated.

"I went by myself to my first doctor's appointment because it didn't seem like a big deal. An angel came and sat by me to give me hope and strength to fully realize the journey ahead," Hoff said, "I decided then that I would be a part of it when my journey was over."

The 49-member Angel Squad is largely made up of other breast cancer survivors. Volunteers put together and distribute "bags of hope" filled with helpful and fun goodies. They can attend appointments and help act as an advocate for patients.

"It can be the simplest thing – spending five minutes talking with someone who really needs to talk," Hoff said.

Their support doesn't stop there; angels also care for the UAB physicians and nurses who face tough deci-



Photo special to the Journal

Kirstin Hoff (right) sits with a breast cancer patient who is traveling back and forth to UAB from Florida. Women from all over the nation come to UAB's Comprehensive Cancer Center.

sions while caring for patients.

"They put in full days seeing patients and doing research. And they always take their time and answer questions," Hoff said, "I don't know how they do it day-in and day-out."

Hoff likens what the Angel Squad does to having a support group through any significant stage in your life.

"Think, even as a mother, you are trying to navigate through all ages

with kids and we rely on friends for support and to say, 'You'll make it through.' This is the same kind of warmth and hope."

Hoff said she has met many amazing people while volunteering, and while others praise her for her work with Angel Squad, she said she does it selfishly.

"Really, I don't need to be thanked because selfishly it fills my heart with a different kind of hope and joy," she

said, "I like to help people but I do it because of the way it makes me feel."

Hoff also said she participates to be a good example for her children.

"I would like to show others and my children that, very often, if we choose the way we go through a difficult journey, then we aren't letting cancer or any other obstacle make all the decisions," she said.

Hoff said that, no matter what stage or type of breast cancer a

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woman has, it can feel strange and scary. That's where, she said, the power of positive thinking and choosing joy can take over.

She tries to help others find joy when they are having a tough time.

In addition to Angel Squad, Hoff uses her talents to raise money for cancer support organizations. She creates art with repurposed materials as part of her Chick 4a Cause campaign. Buyers can choose one of several organizations to which they would like the proceeds from their purchase to be donated.

For more information on Angel Squad, visit uab.edu/angelsquad. ♦