

Support services benefit the patient and their loved ones

By Maureen Bogues

Life is challenging enough before a breast cancer diagnosis, but once a patient begins treatment, the many activities of daily life — clothes to wash, food to prepare, children to pick up from school — suddenly become downright difficult, if not impossible.

Cancer treatment causes fatigue, nausea and fuzzy thinking — among other symptoms — turning routine tasks into major challenges. And then there are the many logistics of making appointments and getting to them.

Family and friends can reach out on their own to help with basic tasks, but they too can find support, and many Bay Area agencies — including Cancer Support Community in Walnut Creek, and Project Open Hand in Oakland and San Francisco — are here to help.

Be specific when offering help

Maybe it should seem obvious, but when offering help to a patient, one of the best pieces of advice is to be specific about how you can help, and don't wait for someone to ask.

Rather than saying, "if you need anything," it is better to offer to do something specific, such as mowing the lawn, driving to a medical appointment or babysitting children, said Margaret Stauffer, chief mission officer for the Cancer Support Community, whose center in Walnut Creek is one of 45 affiliates across the country.

"All of these things might be needed, but it is sometimes hard to ask for help," she said. And of course, patients have a limited amount of energy, especially in the early stages of treatment.

The Cancer Support Community offers free services and activities — including counseling, expressive arts, yoga and other wellness programs — to patients as well as their families, who benefit from the education, as well as the sense of connection that happens when they come to the center.

"The sense of community is huge," Stauffer said. "They connect and give each other ideas. ... The camaraderie is really important."

Nutritious food is a basic need

Of all the challenges facing a patient, one of the most basic is eating right, and Project Open Hand, a San Francisco-Oakland nonprofit, has been providing meals and groceries to patients since 1985. Originally an AIDS support organization, it has grown to serve people with other illnesses, including breast cancer. Within the past year, nearly 300 women have used its services, ranging from shopping for groceries to having meals delivered.

The Project Open Hand grocery center offers menus and food-tasting demonstrations, plus a wide variety of whole grains, high-quality proteins, produce and dairy. Clients may change



what they take from week to week, depending on how they feel. Some weeks they may shop in order to cook for themselves; other weeks they will stockpile frozen meals. For those who are too sick to come into the center, meals can be delivered hot or frozen.

Kim Madsen, director of Nutrition Services, said Project Open Hand provides more than food or meals. "There's a lot of emotion, they're scared and we are here to listen," she said, as well as to educate clients about eating well and seeking factual information about diet and diagnosis.

"There's a lot on the internet, especially around cancer, and it's not evidence-based," she said, including "cleansing" diets or broad pronouncements about what foods to avoid. "I feel like that's one of the things we can do ... quash those fears and provide some common sense."

Dietitians meet with clients one on one, and help them to set up nutritional menus for those who want to cook. Project Open Hand also offers seven different medically tailored meals to deal with different side effects of radiation and chemotherapy. For example, a patient might want a bland diet early in treatment when they feel too sick to eat rich foods, and then opt for something more spicy when they feel better.

Clients, who often steer toward a plant-based diet after diagnosis, report having increased energy and improved moods as they eat more fruits and vegetables, and in greater variety, as a result of accessing the services at Project Open Hand, Madsen said. They also form a supportive community; many of them coming in on the same day to either shop for groceries or volunteer their time to the grocery center, making it a social time as well.

Food is basic, and key, in keeping patients well-fed, engaged and hopeful through recovery.

"It's empowering because it's one less thing to worry about," said Delfin Vigil, director of communications at Project Open Hand. "A lot of people don't know how to eat healthy, and we offer a support system with free food. Everyone needs food and that's what we're here for."

Pay attention to patient's needs – and be flexible



By Maureen Bogues

When it comes to offering support to breast cancer patients, Thuy Tran of San Francisco has some hard-won words of wisdom that might be summed up like this: Stick around and go away.

Or, different advice for different days.

"Stick around" advice applies to those lonely hours long after the early stress of diagnosis and surgery, and the initial shock has worn off. Patients still need a lot of support, both practical and emotional, adapting to a whole new world. The "go away" applies to days when a patient just cannot be around anyone. Mainly, family and friends need to pay attention to what the patient wants and needs, and that varies from day to day.

That advice does not apply, however, to Thuy's constant sidekick Mickey, a Chihuahua-mini pinscher mix who is her best buddy and emotional support dog. "I can't imagine life without him," she said. "He is the best thing that ever happened to me."

Navigating relationships with family and friends in the face of serious illness, however, is a bit more complex.

In the early days of treatment and recovery from surgery back home in Visalia, Calif., she was depressed and wanted to see only her immediate family.

"My friends took it hard when I didn't want to hang out," she said,



Photos courtesy of Thuy Tran

"but eventually, they let it be."

A difficult irony: She was able to see a completely different response to a cancer diagnosis within her own family. Her sister Kim, 31, was diagnosed with breast cancer (and lymphoma) a year after Thuy; they discovered, as a result of Kim's diagnosis, that they both have the PALB2 genetic mutation. (Kim finished radiation treatment in January 2017.)

"We are complete opposites," Thuy said, noting that she is very private, and only wanted, at first, her family to know about her illness. "My sister, all her friends and family knew, and she went out and did a lot of things, went out on dates. I didn't want to see anyone or go anywhere."

Thuy (pronounced "twee"), 29, met her boyfriend, John, in San

Francisco right before her diagnosis, and for the first year of her treatment in Visalia, they had a long-distance relationship, talking every night by phone. They are still together, and last year, traveled to his hometown of Cork, Ireland. Mickey, of course, came along, and is featured in many travel photos.

Thuy was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago and the timing could not have been worse; she had just moved from Visalia to the Bay Area to study for a master's degree in cell and molecular biology at San Francisco State University. After a double-mastectomy surgery in Davis, Calif., she had to return home to Visalia so she could have family support while she went through chemotherapy.

She moved back to San Francisco a year later to resume her studies,

and that's when she became acquainted with Project Open Hand, the Oakland-San Francisco nonprofit that provides groceries and meals to seniors and critically ill people of all ages.

Project Open Hand delivered hot meals to her door when she was "so sick I could barely walk" from the treatment. "I had no hair, so I didn't have to go out (to get food). I could just show up at the door, get it, and I didn't have to hide."

Gradually, after recovering from the early stages of treatment, she began shopping for groceries and, inspired by the healthy meals prepared by Project Open Hand, became interested in cooking her own food.

"It opened up a world of cooking. I never did that before. Now I love to cook," she said. "It is one of my favorite hobbies because of these meals."