

Shining Star winner helps everyone she can

■ *Despite diagnosis, Angel Gnau works to help ovarian cancer patients in her community, and across the country*

By **GEOFF PURSINGER**
The Times

Angel Gnau never saw herself as the volunteering type. She never imagined herself with cancer, either, but since Gnau was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at age 50, she has dedicated her life to not only overcoming the disease, but helping other women going through similar circumstances.

Gnau was named the winner of the Tigard Area Chamber of Commerce's "From the Heart" Volunteer of the Year award, a part of the Chamber's annual Shining Stars community awards.

Nominated by Tigard residents, the award is one of several given each spring to Tigard residents who work to make a difference in people's lives.

Gnau's award is named in honor of Jim Hartman, a longtime community volunteer. The award is meant to highlight people across the city who give back to their community generously.

Gnau spends two days each week at Breast Friends, a Tigard non-profit that works to help women battling cancer. In

her case, Gnau was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2006 and has been in and out of remission, but she doesn't let it get her down.

"My husband calls me his Viking woman because I am too stubborn to give in," she said.

It was in 2009 when she first got involved in Breast Friends, running into members of the group at a Race for the Cure event.

"I was a one-woman crusade, wearing teal to support ovarian cancer survivors in a sea of pink shirts and ribbons," she said. "I saw their logo, of pink and teal, and realized this would be a great thing to get involved with. I'd have more of a voice (with them) than as one person working by themselves."

Gnau began volunteering in 2010, and was named the group's "Ovarian Cancer Liaison" in 2012.

Gnau spends two days a week at Breast Friends, doing odd jobs around the office, running programs and working with patients battling gynecological cancers, including ovarian.

"Angel is pretty darn amazing," said Sharon Henifin, co-founder of Breast Friends, who nominated



Angel Gnau has dedicated her life to helping women battle ovarian cancer. It's a fight she knows well. First diagnosed in 2006, she has been in and out of remission but said she won't stop trying to help people. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Gnau for the award. "She works with other ovarian cancer patients, giving them hope and inspiration. That's all about what we do. She takes really good care to make sure that ovarian cancer is at the top of our minds."

Serious business

Angel takes her work seriously.

A few years ago, Gnau scheduled meetings with Breast Friends officials to discuss

Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, only a few weeks after undergoing major surgery herself.

"Here she is bald-headed and going through her own craziness, but she was making sure we remembered about it at a time when Race for the Cure and breast cancer awareness were everywhere," Henifin said. "That's just how she is."

Gnau said the work Breast Friends does helps people all

over the country.

"They are my second family," she said. "The compassion and empathy that they have, they've been there and done that and understand what women go through with cancer."

When Gnau's cancer returned in 2011, she experienced all the support that Breast Friends could give, she said.

"They circled the wagons around me and we talked and cried together. I know if I need a ride to the doctor or anything, there will always be someone to step up and help."

Gnau also volunteers with the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of Oregon and Southwest Washington, as well as Inspire.com, a website where patients battling several different diseases can support one another directly.

Gnau said she spends a few hours a day online or on the phone with other people battling cancer.

The Angel Award

This isn't the first time Gnau's name has been on an award.

In 2013, Breast Friends launched the "Angel Award," an award recognizing outstanding volunteers and advocates.

"It just seemed appropriate to call it the Angel Award," Henifin said.

And Gnau knows as well as anyone just how important the

helping hands of volunteers can be. Cancer takes your life, Gnau said. Back when she was unable to work, she felt that she couldn't contribute to society.

"It's a way for giving back and feeling useful," she said. "When I got sick and couldn't work anymore I started to feel like I was useless."

An equine appraiser and horse trainer, Gnau said her life has taken an unexpected, but not altogether terrible, turn.

"Cancer changes your life, but it's not always for the bad," she said. "I never would have met Sharon or Becky or the wonderful women over there. That is one of those silver linings."

Gnau said when she was first diagnosed she didn't have a strong support network behind her.

"I needed to hear that I could survive. My passion became helping other women with ovarian cancer. If I could prevent one woman from going through what I endured, then it is all worth it."

Gnau's Shining Stars award will be presented on April 24 at Embassy Suites, 9000 S.W. Hall Blvd.

The Oscars-themed award ceremony includes dinner and silent auction for the Chamber of Commerce.

Tickets cost \$35 per person and can be purchased at tigard-chamber.org.