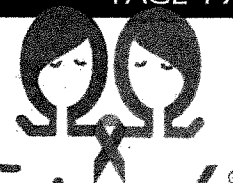


At a time of crisis, Breast Friends is there for her



Breast Friends®

BY REID IFORD, TIGARD LIFE

It is the diagnosis every woman dreads... breast cancer. Fear and concern floods her mind. What will happen now? Will she die? Will she lose her femininity? What about her hair? What will people think? How will she face this? While every case is every bit is unique as each woman who must face this crisis, there is one absolute certainty... if she turns to the support group Breast Friends, she will not face this alone.

Breast Friends cofounders Becky Olson and Sharon Henifin know exactly how a woman feels when she receives this diagnosis, for they have been there. They've had the surgery, experienced the trauma of hair loss, and felt the never-ending fear of the cancer returning. But the two women decided to turn tragedy in their own lives into a beacon of hope for others.

Becky and Sharon formed Breast Friends when they realized the greatest support and understanding they had received was from other women who had already been through the experience. Now Becky serves as director of community outreach, and Sharon is director of programs, as they reach out to women throughout the nation offering help and compassion.

"When you go through chemotherapy and you're dealing with the hair loss, once you lose your hair, and your eyebrows, and your eyelashes..." says Becky, "...even if you cover it up with a wig, or hat, or scarf, everybody knows, and it's really hard," continues Sharon. "You can sort of be in denial, until that happens. That is a huge piece of it." Speaking with Becky and Sharon, it quickly becomes clear how close they are, and how long they have been working together. At times, one will begin a sentence and the other finish it.

"Let me share something with you," says Becky, holding up two hats, one pink and one blue. Both hats feature original artwork. One shows a lady with no hair holding a bunny rabbit, with the embroidered caption "has

anyone seen my hare?" On the other, an elegant lady with no hair is adorned with jewelry and framed in a heart, with the text "temporarily bald, permanently beautiful." Becky was in Memphis recently, speaking to a group about breast cancer.

"I was on stage, and I offered these two hats to people," explains Becky. "I asked if there was anyone in the room who needed one of the hats, and all of a sudden this woman stood up, and I said 'come on up here.' She was wearing a wig, and right in front of everybody she took off her wig. I gave her the hat, and found out that was the first time she had appeared in public without the wig. I thanked her for being brave, and everybody was clapping and cheering. I thought that was so brave, and it shows how something as simple as a hat with a cute saying can reach people and help them face these challenges."

"Losing your breast is very traumatic, as you can well imagine," explains Sharon. "It's tied to your sexuality, your sensuality, your femininity, motherhood... all of these things. Even if they are too big or too small or too whatever, they are yours. Many times, losing your breast, or part of your breast, is something that you have to do because of that cancer situation. So it can create emotional scars as well as physical scars, and every time you see yourself in the mirror it's a constant reminder of what you've gone through, even many years later.

"So it's important to work through those emotions, and that's one of the things Breast Friends helps with, is being able to talk about those hard subjects, those really difficult things," adds Sharon. "Even death and dying, which is a very hard conversation, the reality is that happens to everyone. We're all going to die eventually, but the fact is when you have a cancer diagnosis it brings it right up into your face. Even when you're done with all the treatment, and you can look back and go 'whew, what a rush,' you still have a constant fear, acknowledgment, awareness... that, wow, it could still come back," says Sharon.

Becky and Sharon formed Breast Friends in the year 2000 as a nonprofit. Their headquarters are in Tigard. Breast Friends has spread throughout the region, and now has affiliates in Pennsylvania and Florida, with the possibility of one opening soon in Texas. In their office, a pushpin covered map of the USA shows they have touched lives in all 50 states.

"We have a lot of volunteers," says Becky. "We have amazing supporters that have been on board with us year after year, which has been very exciting." "That also includes corporate sponsors," adds Sharon, "and people who love what we do and refer people to us. These days, with cell phones and the Internet, you don't have to have an affiliate in every community to serve them. That map really does show our reach, because we send the blue and pink hats all over the country, which then initiates the conversation with that patient. We can offer emotional support across the United States."

While the hats are a tangible form of support and encouragement, Breast Friends also provides more typical forms of counseling and support.

"We have lots of different ways of outreaching to patients and survivors," explains Sharon. "A lot of it is one-on-one, and it could be on the phone or face-to-face. It could be email or even texting, depending in part what communication style is most convenient and comfortable for them. Four times a year we hold a beach retreat at Pacific City we call 'Thriving Beyond Cancer.' The focus is to give the patients validation that what they are going through and feeling is normal. We try to give them the tools to move on past their cancer journey and



Becky Olson and Sharon Henifin.

figure out what is important to them and what they want to do in the next chapter of their life."

Breast Friends has a major fundraising event every spring called "Moonlight at the MAC," held at the Multnomah Athletic Club. This generates up to 50% of their yearly revenue. Saturday, May 6, supporters will be entertained by a 16 piece swing group plus participate in many fun activities. As a special incentive, they are offering an Early Bird special for those who register by April 22. More information is available on their website under 'Events.'

To learn more about Breast Friends, to seek help for yourself or a loved one, to volunteer, or to help support their activities, please visit their website at breastfriends.org Becky is an inspirational speaker and author who can be contacted through her website beckyolson.com