

A basket of joy for cancer patients

Chemo Buddy Club gifts lift spirits during treatment process

06:30 PM CDT on Tuesday, October 26, 2004

By KATHY A. GOOLSBY / The Dallas Morning News

Not long after Connie Munk's first chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer this summer, a box arrived in the mail. Inside, she found a basket filled with gifts that were wrapped and numbered, and instructions to open one after each treatment.

"When you're diagnosed with cancer it's pretty devastating, so to get that basket and see all the presents was wonderful," said Ms. Munk, 53, of Greenwood Village, Colo. "Chemo is pretty tough on the body, so to know you can come home and open a present is like a breath of fresh air."

The Chemo Buddy Club box she received is the brainchild of Bedford resident Joy Becker. Her sister was diagnosed as having breast cancer in February 2002, followed by her niece in July 2003. She frequently sends cards to her sister, Judi Sparrow, who needed only surgery to recover.

But her niece, Janna Adams of Keller, faced months of chemotherapy and radiation.

"I didn't want to be on the phone with her every day because she didn't feel good, but I wanted her to know she wasn't alone," said Ms. Becker, 55. "So I started sending her a present to open after each treatment."

The gifts were small, but significant: DVD comedies for laughter, bath products to soothe and relax, knitted booties to warm her feet, a journal to record her thoughts and feelings.

"I think getting those presents carried over into other things," said Ms. Adams, 38. "It taught me to treat myself as I went further along. Now if I'm going to the doctor, I'll stop and get an ice cream because I feel I deserve it with all I'm going through."

Ms. Becker experienced many of the same emotions as her sister and niece. But seeing her niece's response to the gifts made Ms. Becker feel she was making a difference.

"There was nothing I could do to fix Jan, but I thought, 'If I feel helpless, how many other families feel this way?'" said Ms. Becker, a legal secretary for a Dallas law firm. "Sending gifts made me feel I was part of her treatment without intruding, so maybe these gift baskets could be a way to help others feel empowered, too."

She put together some baskets and began researching how to market the Chemo Buddy Club. Ms. Sparrow, who in 2000 moved from Euless to Lake Tahoe, Nev., offered to help.

"I'm retired so I have more time than her," said Ms. Sparrow, 56. "Joy is the creative one, so let her do the creative work and let me do the packing and shipping."

Ms. Sparrow turned a spare bedroom into a Chemo Buddy Club workroom, then printed fliers to pass out at meetings

and health fairs. Ms. Munk's mother, Marty Morrow of South Lake Tahoe, Nev., saw the fliers at a fair in July, just one day after her daughter was diagnosed.

She picked one up from Ms. Sparrow's booth. Later, when doctors determined her daughter needed eight rounds of chemotherapy, Ms. Morrow ordered a basket with eight gifts.

Ms. Morrow said it's debatable whether the sender or receiver benefits the most from the baskets.

"It makes the sender feel better because you feel guilty when you can't be there," she said. "But I know it's done a tremendous amount of good for Connie. It's just a fantastic thing."

Word of mouth in the last few months has garnered orders for about two dozen cancer patients in Texas, Nevada, California, Idaho and Colorado. Prices start at \$59.99 for a four-gift basket; eight gifts are \$99.99.

There are sports-themed baskets and baskets for men, women or children. Each basket contains a party pack with balloons and horns to open last so patients and their families can celebrate the completion of the chemotherapy.

"Cancer takes over your life and everyone sends cards and flowers at the beginning," Ms. Sparrow said. "As the treatment gets longer, the cards and letters slow down, but the Chemo Buddy basket is there for the whole treatment. It's kind of like putting your arms around the person through the whole treatment."

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