

Caregivers: The Unsung Heroes

By Joanne Parrino Cahill

When his 35-year-old wife was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Vince Yee was overwhelmed, and a whirlwind of questions ran through his mind. Who can I talk to? What can I learn?

“Knowledge is strength,” says Yee, who is the father of two young children. He sought out as much help and information as he could to help fight his wife’s illness. “Who can I talk to...to help me help my wife? I wanted to know that I did the best I could for her.”

Caregivers can indeed be the unsung heroes in the fight against cancer. Many new responsibilities fall upon their shoulders: they can become decision-makers, advocates, communicators, hands-on care providers, and social supporters. At the same time, some still work at their full-time jobs with the added pressure of being the primary insurance carriers.

“Doctors, researchers, and drug companies get a lot of credit in the fight for the cure, and rightfully so,” says Ellena Muraco, director of OROC. “But caregivers manage all the day-to-day ups and downs. They can make a huge difference in a patient’s ultimate recovery.”

Muraco, a 14-year ovarian cancer survivor, also reminds women that early detection is key. Symptoms can include bloating, pelvic or abdominal pain, trouble eating or feeling full quickly, and urinary symptoms like urgency or frequency. While these symptoms are vague and could be caused by less serious conditions, it is best to have anything unusual checked out by your physician.

As for Yee, he credits the world-class medical care in Cleveland, along with family and extended family – what he calls a network of



Vince, Tyler, Lauren and Meghan Yee

“superfriends” – with supporting him and wife Meghan during her treatment and recovery.

“Don’t bear all the weight on your shoulders,” advises Yee. “There are so many people and organizations willing to help you. Let them help...Good things will happen!”

Yee also gained information and resources from organizations like OROC and The Gathering Place. Susan Marinac, a social worker with The Gathering Place, echoes his advice.

“When friends ask, ‘Is there something I can do?’ say yes,” emphasizes Marinac.

Marinac leads free weekly support groups for caregivers at the Gathering Place locations in Westlake and Beachwood. The groups run simultaneously with sessions for cancer patients, so that caregivers and patients can drive together. The Gathering Place also offers a wide variety of programs and services, all free, that address the emotional, physical, spiritual, and social needs of people touched by cancer, including one-on-one counseling, educational materials, and help with community referrals.

“Caregivers need to normalize their stress levels,” says Marinac. “Their stress is real, and they need to take care of themselves as much as the patient.”

One thing she encourages caregivers to do is to visit their own doctors, as it is easy to get sick and run down during this stressful time. She also encourages caregivers to “take a cancer vacation” once a week by doing something simple that has nothing to do with caregiving, like getting a manicure or going to lunch with a friend.

Now Yee is paying it forward. Megan’s scans and numbers still look great after eight years, and both are OROC volunteers.

“I have a reinvigorated purpose in life,” he says of his work with OROC. “It doesn’t feel like a chore at all. I want to help people in the same way so many people helped us.”

To honor and remember all who have been touched by ovarian cancer, OROC facilitates the lighting of the Terminal Tower in teal lights on September 1, the beginning of Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. OROC will also host a luncheon and fashion show on September 24 for ovarian cancer survivors.

For more information about OROC, or to make a donation, visit WWW.OROC.org.



www.oroc.org

A Caregivers Bill of Rights

By Jo Horne,
Author of *Caregiving:
Helping an Aging Loved One*

I have the right

To take care of myself. This is not an act of selfishness. It will give me the capacity of taking better care of my relative.

To seek help from others, even though my relative may object. I recognize the limits of my own endurance and strength.

To maintain facets of my own life that do not include the person I care for, just as I would if he or she were healthy. I know that I do everything that I reasonably can for this person, and I have the right to do some things for myself.

To get angry, be depressed, and express other difficult feelings occasionally.

To reject any attempt by my relative (either conscious or unconscious) to manipulate me through guilt, anger, or depression.

To receive consideration, affection, forgiveness and acceptance for what I do for my loved one for as long as I offer these qualities in return.

To take pride in what I am accomplishing and to applaud the courage it has sometimes taken to meet the needs of my relative.

To protect my individuality and my right to make a life for myself that will sustain me when my relative no longer needs my full-time help.

To expect and demand that as new strides are made in finding resources to aid physically and mentally impaired older persons in our country, similar strides will be made toward aiding and supporting caregivers.

To _____ (add your own statement of rights to this list. Read it every day.)