

## Stearns ‘right person at right time’ to lead Pink Lemonade Project in pandemic

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### 3 Photos



Pink Lemonade Project board member Susan Pagel, front left, and Pink Lemonade Project CEO Susan Stearns, front right, walk along the Vancouver's Columbia River Renaissance Trail with Pink Lemonade clients in August. Although many Pink Lemonade events and retreats have been canceled, Stearns said they have tried to start some safe and distanced gatherings back up again. (Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian files)

Susan Stearns took the helm at Pink Lemonade Project on March 2, just as the world was starting to fall apart. For the past six months, she's navigated the Vancouver-based nonprofit through a pandemic and found new ways of connecting with people affected by breast cancer.

“We’re kind of dancing in the moment,” Stearns said.

Her background includes 25 years in health care policy reform. In 1993, Stearns worked on the Clinton Health Care Task Force and she spent one summer at the National Institutes of Health, where her cubical was down the hall from the now well-known White House coronavirus adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci.

At one point, Stearns ran a small business out of her home in Portland. So, she’s not fazed by running Pink Lemonade Project out of her living room.

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic has stymied the organization in a few significant ways. For one, it can’t hold its popular retreat series for survivors near Crown Point in the Columbia River Gorge. (Reservations were made for 2021 with hopes that the series can reemerge.)

Programming and events have shifted online, which actually broadened the organization’s reach both in terms of where participants live and where they are in their breast cancer treatment. Traffic and crossing the Interstate 5 Bridge alone can be barriers to attending in-person events. And, these gatherings attracted people who had the time, energy and health to make the effort, typically people who were ending treatment. Now, people who are actively undergoing chemotherapy, and may often feel weak and tired, can join online and engage in that community. Pink Link, an online event series, features health care providers tackling different topics and classes such as art therapy and cooking.

Even before Stearns was hired, Pink Lemonade Project aimed to serve more people in active treatment, not just those on the other side.

Virtually Pink filled some gaps. Because of security concerns, hospitals would not allow breast cancer support groups to function via Zoom. Pink Lemonade Project did not have that same restriction so mentoring programs, support groups and board meetings could all continue virtually.

Board President Marie Andrus said Pink Lemonade Project’s mission is to support people in their breast cancer journey in ways the medical establishment cannot. That means, for one, having a network of supports and mentors to wade through decisions and courses of treatment.

“I think we are the future of health care and our services are going to be ever more needed,” Andrus said.

She said Stearns did not waste a minute, and soon after she was hired figured out ways of delivering services under the new reality.

“We know the need is out there and it’s our job to make people aware that our services are available,” Andrus said.

Besides online programming, Pink Lemonade Project is offering financial aid through Pink Practicalities. Stearns secured two significant grants, the bulk of which went to cash assistance for people who were in treatment and impacted by the pandemic. The fund has helped people with rent and mortgage payments, transportation, groceries, as well as insurance deductibles and copays.

“It’s blossomed nicely,” Stearns said, adding that the organization is trying to better serve people at all income levels.

During her own breast cancer treatment, Stearns was fortunate to have the support of her family.

While showering in the spring of 2018, Stearns discovered a lump in her breast and made a mammogram appointment that same day. Her cancer required 3 1/2 months of chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. She opted for full breast reconstruction.

“I wanted a trade-in and didn’t want the ones with cancer anymore,” Stearns said.

During her treatment, she considered everyone part of her health care team, from her surgical oncologist to her dentist to the pharmacist at her local grocery store.

Stearns brought that same ideology to the way she leads Pink Lemonade Project and describes herself as super collaborative.

“I insist on it,” she said. “Collaboration is always beneficial in the long run.”

It used to be that breast cancer organizations didn’t get along and saw each other as competition. That’s shifted over time, and Stearns sees how valuable it is to know what other organizations are doing and how they can complement each other.

“The joke has always been, ‘I’ll call anybody,’ ” Stearns said.

Besides her network, Stearns’ experience as a survivor and patient is one of the most important qualifications she brings to the job, board member Lee Rafferty said. Some things people don’t understand unless they’ve gone through it — the fears, insecurities and the way a breast cancer diagnosis rattles your very being. Rafferty herself is a breast cancer survivor. She describes Stearns as the “right person at the right time.”

When the pandemic hit there was a tremendous amount of work to be done updating the website and making virtual programming. It was a “trial by fire” for the new CEO.

“I just knew we were in good hands,” Rafferty said. “She was on top of things and so organized.”

For Rafferty, there's nothing more satisfying than knowing Pink Lemonade Project is and will continue to be relevant.