

Pandemic isolated breast cancer patients when they needed connection most;
Participation in Pink Lemonade support programs grew 30% after nonprofit went virtual

By Erin Middlewood, Columbian Features editor
Published: October 10, 2021, 6:05am



Susan Stearns stands near the book bank at Pink Lemonade Project's downtown Vancouver offices. She took over as CEO of the nonprofit as the pandemic hit in March 2020 and has guided an expansion of programs. Participation increased 30 percent during the pandemic. (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian)

Pink-clad runners and walkers are converging on Vancouver's waterfront this morning. The return of the [Girlfriends Run](#) in person after last year's virtual event is just another example of how breast cancer patients, survivors and supporters have adapted to the dangerous and shifting circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"So many were getting new diagnoses as the pandemic was shutting everything down," said Susan Stearns, CEO of the Vancouver-based [Pink Lemonade Project](#), one of the beneficiaries of today's fundraising run.

As the coronavirus began sweeping the globe in 2020, it set in motion safety precautions that isolate breast cancer patients when they need connection the most. For the most part, they must attend appointments alone, without the company of supportive family and friends during

hourlong chemotherapy infusions or in hospitals for surgeries. Weakened by punishing treatments, even vaccinated patients live in fear of catching potentially deadly COVID-19.

Plus, the pandemic disrupted breast cancer screening. [A study released earlier this year](#) showed mammograms dropped by as much as 80 percent nationwide, which researchers predict will drive an increase in breast cancer deaths by 2030. [This year, an estimated 43,600 women in the U.S. are expected to die from breast cancer.](#)

“The pandemic has been devastating to our community, economy, nation and globe. We will spend decades digging out,” Stearns said.

Given that its name is all about making lemonade out of lemons, it should be no surprise that her nonprofit has tried to make the most out of the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Pink Lemonade Project during the pandemic has really had an opportunity to spread our wings and serve more people affected by breast cancer,” Stearns said.

Going online

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.

“Zoom is not the same, but the connection it has provided has been really important,” Stearns said.

Even when the pandemic abates and meetings return in person, Pink Lemonade Project will offer online options as well, she said.

“If you’re in treatment, you’re immunocompromised. You might feel weak and tired. The ability to join at 6 at night without having to deal with Interstate 5 is an advantage,” Stearns said. “By the end of 2020, we had actually grown participation in our programs by 30 percent. In a virtual format, cancer patients have been able to go to more things. We really only envision a hybrid future.”

Expanding reach

Pink Lemonade Project has expanded since Allen and Cassie Gabriel, both Vancouver physicians, founded the nonprofit in 2010 to support those dealing with breast cancer treatment and recovery. It all started with a retreat for 14 women. Since then, it has helped thousands through support groups, financial assistance, a book bank, mentoring and other programs.

In 2020, Pink Lemonade Project counted 791 “contacts,” Stearns said. She uses that term, she explained, because some may be counted more than once if they participate in multiple programs.

Part of that expansion occurred this year when Pink Lemonade Project stepped in after a major player left the region.

[Susan G. Komen](#) closed its Portland offices in March. The national leadership consolidated the foundation’s affiliate network at its Texas headquarters.

Several Portland-area nonprofits took over pieces of Komen’s local offerings. Pink Lemonade Project ended up with two programs. It now organizes the Metastatic Breast Cancer Dinner Series, a community-building event for those with terminal cancer. It also took over the Treatment Access Program, which provides gift cards for gas, lodging and food for those in breast cancer treatment across Clark, Cowlitz and Skamania counties and all Oregon counties.

These added programs, along with several grants for other projects, pushed the nonprofit’s budget from roughly \$295,000 in 2020 to \$709,000 this year, Stearns said.

“We’re a little nonprofit,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of growing to do to pull all this off.”