

Latina support community forms for breast cancer patients in Oregon, Southwest Washington

By Zoë Buhmaster for The Columbian

Published: October 9, 2022, 5:41am

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From left: Lucy Beltran, Esthela Cazarez, Susan Stearns and Margarita Jimenez Pacheco stand by the bright pink car sponsored by Vancouver Toyota for Pink Lemonade Project. The women met for the first time in August after participating in a Latina support group for Spanish speaking patients that met virtually during the pandemic. (Norma Millan/Oregon Child Development Coalition)

When Lucy Beltran found out she had breast cancer in 2019, she scoured the internet searching for an Oregon or Washington support group in Spanish, her native language. After not finding any Latina support groups, she settled on the Pink Lemonade Project's English support group, figuring it was "better than nothing."

Yet, the idea that there was not a support group for Latinas in the area continued to bother her. She brought the idea to Susan Stearns, CEO of the Vancouver-based Pink Lemonade Project, a nonprofit that supports those affected by breast cancer.

“One day I’m talking with Susan, and I just say, ‘What about a group in Spanish?’ ” said Beltran, a family educator with Oregon Child Development Coalition.

Stearns pounced on the idea.

“Pink Lemonade Project has a contact in our network who was a bicultural, bilingual, licensed clinical social worker who also happens to be a breast cancer survivor. Lights went off for me that we had a resource that we could provide,” Stearns said.

In mid-February 2021, the idea came to fruition over Zoom. Since then, the support group meets for 90 minutes on the second Tuesday of every month virtually.

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Beltran and bilingual social worker Kelly Selis, also a breast cancer survivor, facilitate the meetings. Selis said their goal is to create a space where participants can share their various emotions and challenges.

“I just see the power of groups,” Selis said, speaking from her experience as a therapist. “When you’re diagnosed everything changes. So to have that space to share resources, it can be really powerful.”

Selis and Beltran lead the group in discussing various topics related to wellness based on interest expressed by the group. After one member mentioned curiosity about food in relation to health, the women brought in a nutrition specialist to present information and answer questions. Last month, Beltran led a discussion on self-care and how to effectively manage stress.

The group has about nine consistent members, but attendance fluctuates depending on the women’s schedules each month. The group is currently accepting new members.

Members Zoom in from all over the Portland metro area and Vancouver, even attracting a woman living in Bogota, Colombia. She heard about the group from her mother, a member from Vancouver who attends regularly.

The group is sponsored by Oregon Child Development Coalition, Northwest Family Services and the Pink Lemonade Project.

For Esthela Cazarez, the group is an opportunity to connect with those who, in some ways, understand what she's going through more than her family can.

"The participants in the group create stronger connections because sometimes family doesn't understand how we're feeling," Cazarez said as Beltran translated. "It's easier to connect between us. Sometimes we're quieter with everything with family because we don't want them to feel worried or scared."

Group members include those who have been recently diagnosed, as well as those who have already undergone mastectomies.

"To see the group every month, I think that's why I'm here," Beltran said. "When I have my own diagnosis, I feel like this is for something. We share everything. We're crying, we're laughing." On Aug. 13, Cazarez, Margarita Jimenez Pacheco, Stearns and Beltran met in person for the first time at a vaccination event held in Mariposa Park in Cornelius, Ore. Beltran's agency, the Oregon Child Development Coalition, hosted, inviting Pink Lemonade Project to provide a resource table and creating the perfect opportunity for the group members to see each other face to face.

"For me it was really nice," Beltran said. "My heart was so happy ... when I saw Margarita and Esthela walking. It was as if I had known them for a long time."

The group is open to all women undergoing breast cancer, identifying as Latina women or otherwise. Those interested in joining the group can email Lucy Beltran at lucila.beltran@ocdc.net or Susan Stearns at susan@pinklemonadeproject.com, or call Stearns at 360-952-3814, ext. 2.

"The expectation is the group will continue for many, many years and help more women," Cazarez said.