

Vancouver-based Pink Lemonade Project emerges from pandemic bigger, stronger

Nonprofit expands services, partnerships, seeks to fill key posts

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Pink Lemonade Project Girlsfriends coordinator Linda Aronsohn, left, talks to Zachary Maina of Portland on Sept. 8 at The Standard Volunteer Expo at Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland. The nonprofit took over many programs formerly managed by Susan G. Komen's Portland-

based chapter when the national nonprofit consolidated operations. (Photos by Taylor Balkom/The Columbian)

The Vancouver-based [Pink Lemonade Project](#) is growing exponentially.

The nonprofit served 1,754 patients in 2021, 55 percent more than the previous year, according to its [2021 annual report](#). The organization's revenue grew to \$666,932 in 2021, a 126 percent increase from 2020. Additionally, the nonprofit has been busy developing new partnerships with area health care systems and other community-based organizations to collaborate on ways to best support breast cancer patients.

All that has come with growing pains, according to Pink Lemonade Project CEO Susan Stearns.

"We have elevated the reputation, the status and the value of this organization in a trying time for the health care system and proven ourselves to be a valuable partner to them by offering a range of support to their patients," she said. "Opportunities are flying at us, and we need more human power to address them all."

To help meet the demands of so many new programs and partnerships, the organization recently hired a program director.

P I N K L E M O N A D E P R O J E C T

The Vancouver-based nonprofit provides support for breast cancer survivors through healing retreats, peer-to-peer support programs and breast reconstruction advocacy: www.pinklemonadeproject.org

"We're just so excited to have another full-time employee," Stearns said. "Especially since we're covering a geographic region that is bigger than we've ever served before."

Allen and Cassie Gabriel, both Vancouver physicians, founded the nonprofit in 2010 to support those dealing with breast cancer treatment and recovery in Vancouver. Now, the organization has programs available to people in all 36 counties of Oregon and six in Southwest Washington.

"All this growth will help us be the organization we want to be, which is a leading organization for breast cancer patients," Stearns said.

New partnerships

Since Stearns took over as CEO in 2020, she has focused on collaborating with other breast cancer organizations and health systems.

"Breast cancer is the leading cause of major illness and death for women, and no one organization really has the capacity to provide all the programming, let alone the funding, to support all the programs that are needed," Stearns said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, [the number of people getting screened for cancer in the United States dropped dramatically](#). To get people back into regular screenings, Pink Lemonade Project worked with PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center to provide an all-day mammography event in October.

This is new for the Pink Lemonade Project, which has focused in the past on helping patients after they're diagnosed. But the organization sees a need for "more of an early detection component in the realm of programs that we offer ... especially with populations of color, who are oftentimes diagnosed ... at later stages and experience a higher death rate than white women," said Ann Berryman, Pink Lemonade Project's development and marketing manager.

Diversification

Moving forward, Pink Lemonade Project hopes to provide additional screening opportunities throughout the year. The mammography day with PeaceHealth in October will provide a road map for how to build similar partnerships in the future, Stearns said.

The nonprofit hopes to collaborate with even more organizations.

"It's a work in progress, but we're identifying key partners to help do the work," Stearns said.

For example, Pink Lemonade Project is helping the Vancouver dragon boat team Catch 22 and one in Portland, Pink Phoenix, create a composite team of breast cancer survivors to represent the Pacific Northwest at the International Breast Cancer Dragon Boat race in New Zealand in 2023.

In addition, the organization is participating in health fairs and other in-person events to bolster Pink Lemonade Project's presence, especially among minority groups that are disproportionately impacted by breast cancer.

"We're engaging with more very specific organizations, such as Latina-serving organizations, Native American organizations, and slowly building out into the Ukrainian community, the Russian community, the African American community and the Asian community," Berryman said. "We're diversifying our committees, our volunteer base and our board of directors ... not only diversity by race, but by age and by the stage of breast cancer. We have people who are survivors, and we have people living with metastatic breast cancer. And so that's critical. Also representing both sides of the river is very important."

Growing forward

Many of Pink Lemonade Project's programs went virtual during the pandemic. Now, the organization provides both virtual and in-person options for its patients.

"Programming remaining both virtual and in person is critical to the overall well-being of the community, but also really enhancing what Pink Lemonade Project is doing," Berryman said.

Stearns said the biggest hurdle for the organization right now is staffing.

“Financially we’re growing by leaps and bounds, and our hope is that we will be staffed appropriately by the end of the year,” Berryman said. “We’ve received a lot more funding to hire key roles to make that work happen.”

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Range of experiences

As more opportunities for partnerships arise, Pink Lemonade Project has had to be discerning.

“We really scrutinize partnerships from a position of: We need to walk the talk,” Berryman said. “We need to make sure these partnerships are a good reflection of what the public wants, but also how we want to do business.”

Part of that has involved thinking critically about “pink washing,” Berryman said.

Last year, [Pink Lemonade Project began organizing the Metastatic Breast Cancer Dinner Series](#), a community-building event for those with terminal cancer.

“In accepting the Metastatic Breast Cancer Dinner Series, we had to be much more thoughtful about the language we were using,” Stearns said. “At the end of the day, pink is the color of our cancer. But we have people with breast cancer who hate the color. Especially the metastatic breast cancer community — they don’t identify, or most of them don’t identify, with the pink.”

Meeting the needs of all breast cancer patients — from survivors to those in the end stages of the disease — is a priority for the organization moving forward.

“Organizationally, we have improved and evolved over the last couple of years,” Stearns said. “Now, we’re trying to be much more sensitive to the range of experiences.”

F R E E S C R E E N I N G S

What: Free breast cancer screenings offered by the Kearney Breast Center and the state’s Breast, Cervical and Colon Health Program.

When: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Oct. 22.

Where: Kearney Breast Center at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center, 200 Mother Joseph Place, Suite 420, Vancouver.

Details: The event is for those age 40 or older who haven't had a breast screening for at least a year and are uninsured or underinsured. (Citizenship not required.)

Contact: For more information or to enroll, call 800-992-1817, ext. 1 or 2, or LanguageLine at 888-202-3301.