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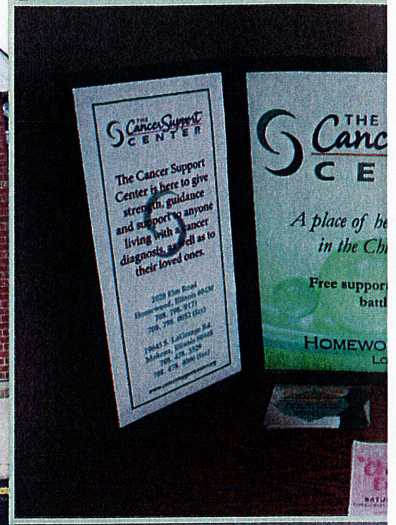
MOKENA NEIGHBORS

Cancer Support Center

Offering hope,
help & healing



The team at the Cancer Support Center in Mokena are (above L to R) Jen Harris, Kelly Kopale, Chris Rosandich, and Sue Armato



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By John Stein · Photos by Scott Duff

Sue Armato has a deep understanding of why The Cancer Center in Mokena's work is so important to those people who are living with cancer. A cancer survivor for more than a decade, she is currently the executive director for the organization that has facilities in Homewood and Mokena.

Nine years ago she began leading the group. It was something she felt she was uniquely prepared for. "I had just completed my own cancer battle and saw this position at the Center and felt like this was my chance to pay forward my good fortune of life. It was my way to make sense of all the nonsense that cancer is," she says.

Born in Chicago, her family moved to the Carpentersville/Dundee area, where she lived until attending The University of Chicago, earning a BA in Economics and MA in Social Service Administration. An executive director for more than 20 years in a variety of organizations from education to individual and family economic and life improvement places, Sue says her many years as an executive director, and her own cancer experience, which was challenging, made her ready to take on the incredible opportunity at The Center.

The Cancer Support Center facility has been in Mokena for 17 years. "We are so fortunate to own our current building, thanks to an amazing grant from the Great Lakes Bank Charitable Foundation several years ago," says Sue. "The Mokena facility is 5,400 square feet right on LaGrange Road, so it is easy to access."

Many Services

The Cancer Support Center has space for counseling and therapeutic massage as well as larger spaces for group activities

such as yoga, Zumba, cooking demonstrations, larger networking or support groups, and so much more. There is a library so people can take out books about their cancer or learn about ways to manage it. A wig boutique is also available.

"Because of all the programs offered at The Center, we require a variety of spaces to be private and soundproof," she explains. "We are so grateful for this incredible space in Mokena, where we see people daily, providing all of these free services to anyone in need."

The Center offers programs in five areas:

- Body Image including a Wig Boutique, Hair Accessories, Breast Prosthetics, Cosmetic Workshops, and Sexuality Programs.
- Education and Networking include support groups for specific types of cancer, family outings, events, and counseling.
- Fitness and Physical wellness include yoga classes, Zumba, functional movement assistance, reiki, and massage therapy.
- Counseling and stress management includes Counseling, guided journaling and relaxation, meditation, and art therapy programs.
- Nutrition includes cancer-fighting cooking demos, energy and weight management programs, one-on-one nutrition education, and cookbooks and print resources.

Who Can Benefit

Sue emphasizes that The Cancer Support Center is open to all ages. She says they have had participants attend programs starting at age three! The Center offers programming for children, including summer camps where young people undergoing cancer treatment,



or children whose parents or grandparents are undergoing treatment, can meet and engage in socially-enriching activities.

"We have participants spanning generations in their own families, so we provide care for all, no matter what their age," says Sue. "We know well that cancer affects more than just the person diagnosed, and we know that engaging the members of the family alongside their loved one is incredibly significant to improve quality of life through a difficult time."

All services at The Cancer Support Center (CSC) are free for as long as participants need them. Many support centers will provide a certain number of free services and then begin to bill the client or require insurance, but not at CSC, where one in seven participants have been active for over 10 years.

"We know that for many people, insurance and out-of-pocket expenses are huge barriers to care, and we are working hard to remove that obstacle," she says.

Each Person is Different

According to Sue, the Center and its staff provide the emotional, physical, nutritional, and social supports that oncology can't. It's been proven time and time again that these supplements to cancer care prolong lives and improve quality of life, regardless of diagnosis.

"In a way, the pandemic required us to look beyond our localized scope and now we serve participants in 11 different states. For a small, community-based organization, we're seeing immense demand and growth in what we are able to do through virtual programs and telehealth."

It's as simple as acknowledging that each person is different, explains Sue. Individuals' lives, their health, and their emotional reactions to events vary greatly. Just as there are many forms and stages of cancer itself, people's cancer journeys are different. The longer you've been at The Center, you see a beautiful trend that, with certain groups and programs, people have cancer journeys that parallel each other.

"All of our programs are developed by licensed professionals and have been shown, through research studies, to help people undergoing physical and emotional distress. Nothing is set in stone, and we acknowledge that what someone may need right after being diagnosed may be different than when in treatment, what they need in survivorship, and so on. We really take our individual participant journeys into account throughout their entire time here," she says.

The Center has about a dozen full- or part-time employees that work administratively as well as serving as points of contact or counselors for participants. While the Center hires licensed professionals to conduct programs, Sue says they have a very healthy volunteer base.

Special events are part of the reason why The Center can provide their services free of charge. They host five signature events throughout the year, including a Gala in April; Walk of Hope in May and October; Golf Outing in September, and Holiday Spirits party in December. To find special event details, go to www.cancersupportcenter.org.

A place of hope, help, and healing – both of the spirit and mind – Sue says there are many personal rewards she gets every day working with people at The Center. "Often people will ask me, 'how can you work around cancer patients all the time? Isn't that depressing?' and what I will tell them is that I get to see miracles happen every single day

"I see people who believe their life is over realize that with support and care that they will make it. I see people who have lost a loved one to cancer and do not know if they will ever feel again, and I get to see those people emerge out of the darkness of loss with our support and care; I see women come in tears because their pillow was covered in hair due to the chemo, and leave The Center smiling with a new wig on that makes them feel a little bit more like themselves. Every day I see hope in action because of what we do at CSC – how fortunate and blessed am I to witness that!"