



# A Time for Healing

*An annual retreat  
for breast cancer  
survivors*



**W**hen breast cancer treatments end, many women struggle to make sense of their experience and how to begin the process of moving on with the rest of their life. Some breast cancer survivors feel emotionally isolated and can face psychological issues. To help meet the unique needs of its breast cancer patients post-treatment, the cancer program at Winchester Medical Center hosts an annual overnight fall retreat (Saturday-Sunday). Just as the passing seasons signal a time of change for the earth, our fall retreat is the time to address the changes in the lives of our community's breast cancer survivors. The retreat provides women an opportunity to move beyond an intellectual understanding of their disease and allows them to focus on their emotional needs.

"I kept a lot of emotions to myself because I didn't want anybody else to worry," said one of the breast cancer survivors attending our retreat.

### In the Beginning

Winchester Medical Center is one of six hospitals within the Valley Health Hospital System. Winchester Medical Center is a CoC-accredited program; its Breast Care Program received NAPBC accreditation in 2009 and re-accreditation in 2013. In 2007 our community resource center, Wellspring, opened its doors, offering hope and information to anyone facing a cancer diagnosis and their caregivers. Wellspring's opening provided an excellent opportunity for Winchester Medical Center's cancer program to offer breast cancer survivors a chance to move forward after their treatment ended. Accordingly, that same year, Valley Health incorporated breast cancer survivorship as part of their cancer care continuum with this retreat.

### Laying the Foundation

Our annual retreat seeks to promote healing and transformation. As breast cancer patients move into the survivorship phase of their journey, their healing and moving forward to lifelong sur-

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ivorship requires reflection and support. Our time together during the retreat is aimed at that goal. The retreat provides a safe, nurturing environment for these women to express their thoughts and fears to others who have faced similar experiences. Most of our attendees are within three years of completing their cancer treatment and still processing what has happened to them and how their lives are now changed forever.

Our time together begins with a "contract of confidentiality," which seeks to put everyone at ease so they feel safe about sharing their private thoughts and feelings with one another.

Cancer program staff stress the need for attendees to be caring and compassionate listeners for all and to look at ourselves in a gentler way.

"[At the retreat] you could be open. You could talk and everyone would understand," said one attendee.

The retreat agenda has evolved over the years as we provide varied multisensory activities and healing therapies to help the women find their own path to living fully once again. For each retreat, we incorporate a variety of self-exploration activities that provide an opportunity for attendees to adopt these as lifelong coping techniques to support a high quality of life.

## Fostering Engagement & Support

We keep our annual retreat small, with no more than 14 women. The intimate size of the group provides a unique opportunity for these women to fully share with each other. Many of the participants share that our retreat is the first time they have opened up about their cancer diagnosis and the fears and other feelings associated with their diagnosis and treatment. Most do not wish to burden family or friends with their thoughts, but feel a sense of comfort and openness among this small group of women.

One engaging activity retreat participants have embraced over the years is the passing of sage boughs. Sage is symbolic of helping to find one's center, awaken one's inner self, clear emotional obstructions, align group energy, and promote calmness and clarity. Retreat attendees pass the sage wand around as they begin to share their personal stories. The boughs of sage offer a sense of comfort—something to hold onto while opening up their personal lives to virtual strangers.

Our retreat is held in a beautiful natural setting conducive to reflection. This time away from their families offers an opportunity for personal reflection and a chance to discover and renew any passions that may have been put aside while going through treatment. Attendees have a chance to bond with each other—sharing their stories and fears. We see our retreat as a “pause” in these women's daily lives, a venue to put our breast cancer survivors first and acknowledge and meet their unique needs. This allows participants to take a step back, evaluate their lives, and determine what in their life is really important to them. A quote by American Naturalist John Burroughs is one we share every year, “I go to Nature to be soothed and healed and to have my senses put in order once more.”

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## Retreat Activities

Nutrition after a cancer diagnosis is one aspect of the recovery process that breast cancer survivors have control over and often seek as much knowledge about as possible. A healthy eating presentation with nutrition tips by either a local chef or our registered dietitian, who is also certified in oncology nutrition, is always a popular event at our retreat.

Creative therapies, such as visual arts and expressive writing, are used to promote healing during our retreat. According to one study, “The relaxation and symptom reduction produced by creative expression opens pathways to emotional healing.”<sup>1</sup> Our retreat attendees engage in a powerful healing art expression project that involves creating a collage of pictures and words clipped from magazines. Attendees' choice of pictures and words tend to center around areas central to their emotional well-being at this point in their life and activities that they would like to start doing again or possibly try for the very first time. The collages are placed in a booklet that each attendee takes home as a reminder of what matters to her.

During our healing art expression project, we also engage attendees through the use of music to relax and entertain as we create. “In several clinical studies examining the effects of music and music therapy on healing and wellness, music has been found to be a form of relaxation and anxiety reduction.”<sup>1</sup>

Massage therapists from the hospital's fitness center volunteer to offer seated massages for everyone. For some, our retreat is the first time they have experienced any type of massage therapy. Releasing stress and minimizing distress by manipulating neck and back muscles revitalizes participants. In fact, many go on to make massage a regular part of their health and wellness regimens.

As part of the retreat, we also offer a writing exercise titled, “Love Letter to Self.” Everyone receives a blank sheet of stationery with instructions that the words they write are for their eyes only.

Social psychologist Dr. James W. Pennebaker of the University



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Attendees share ideas on the healing arts project.

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A group photo is sent to all attendees as a lasting keepsake.

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of Texas, a pioneer in the study of using expressive writing as a route to healing, has said that, “When people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experience improved health. Emotional upheavals touch every part of our lives and writing helps us focus and organize the experience.”<sup>2</sup>

Attendees are given time to write down their thoughts, wishes, dreams, or any subject important to them at that moment. Envelopes are sealed before they are handed to staff, and we mail the letters to each woman approximately 10 days after the retreat. This letter serves as a gentle reminder of what she has discovered about herself over the weekend.

Over the seven years that we’ve held our retreat for breast cancer survivors, events have also included sessions on yoga, Reiki, guided meditation, exercise, nature walks, and—everyone’s favorite—s’mores by the campfire, a means of providing warmth and promoting social gathering. Campfires are an excellent way to foster group interaction and usually lead everyone to feeling relaxed and open for conversation. Attendees often respond to this activity as it serves as a reminder of simpler times; many of these women have not been around a campfire since they were children. For most, the crackling sounds of the fire and smoky aroma immediately invoke a relaxed state of mind.

Closure activities at our retreat include an annual group photo, which is sent to the all attendees as a lasting memento. We conclude our retreat with a circle of hands ceremony guided by one of our parish nurses who leads everyone down a non-denominational spiritual path as we begin to say good-bye to each other.

“We left there not feeling sad about anything. It’s time for us to live. Time to think a little about us for a change and not feel guilty,” said one attendee.

### The Positive Effect

The breast cancer survivor retreat has had a positive effect on both our patients and our cancer care support team. Retreat participants can stay in touch with their new support group, if they so desire. Most of our retreat attendees continue to stay in touch with each other and with cancer program staff through our “Care to Share” email and phone list. Some of our alumni experience recurrence of their disease and have counted on each other for support through this trying time.

Our physicians have commented on the positive impact the retreat has had on their patients’ outlook on life and have been very supportive of our efforts over the years. A separate alumni group of women (all former breast cancer patients) meet once a year for a weekend of togetherness. All of these efforts support our survivorship efforts and help our patients develop a healthy emotional outlook regarding their quality of life.



To measure the success of our annual breast cancer retreat and determine the effectiveness of the sessions and activities, we conduct an evaluation specific to each session or activity. A survey is provided at the beginning of the program and attendees are asked to complete the appropriate section as each session or activity ends. This allows retreat participants to offer real-time feedback, when the experience and their observations are fresh. We use these surveys to ensure a quality retreat and identify any areas for improvement.

### Our Team

The weekend retreat is staffed and enriched by our multidisciplinary team, which includes nurses, yoga or Reiki masters, nutrition specialists, massage therapists, a social worker, a school educator and counselor, a certified cancer exercise specialist, and a regional faith community nurse coordinator. Some retreat staff are breast cancer survivors themselves, which enriches the experience for attendees as they feel an immediate sense of camaraderie and comfort with our staff. Our planning committee is made up of four survivors—three breast cancer survivors and one thyroid cancer survivor. The planning committee is the driving force behind the retreat agenda as the members have first-person knowledge of what cancer patients are seeking as they enter into survivorship.

### Our Funding

Since we began hosting our annual breast cancer retreat, the Winchester Medical Center Foundation has generously funded the event. To do so, the foundation holds an annual Pink Luncheon every spring, which provides the majority of the financial support for the retreat. To help cover the cost of the over-night stay, we

request a \$49 registration fee from participants; however, we do offer scholarships for those who cannot afford the registration fee.

### Final Thoughts

Our annual retreat is about celebrating survivorship, becoming empowered as aspirations are rediscovered, and renewing a commitment to one's self. While retreats are not a new concept, ours has proven to be important to our rural community. This retreat was spearheaded by a breast cancer survivor who is a hospital employee and the author of this article. I attended a retreat after my treatment ended, and it inspired and energized me to pursue developing one in my own community. Interestingly, we have received calls from other hospitals seeking to send their breast cancer survivors to our retreat. Therefore, whether a patient is local or not, we are determined to empower any breast cancer patient. Our aim each year is to support our breast cancer survivors as they re-evaluate their lives and re-prioritize their goals. Restoring hope will provide the catalyst to reinstate balance as they strive for a meaningful and extraordinary quality of life. 

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### References

1. Stuckey H, Nobel J. The connection between art, healing, and public health: a review of current literature. *Amer J Pub Health*. 2010;100(2): 254-263.

Top: Planning Committee staff members, Carol, Debbie, Colleen, and Lori, who are all cancer survivors.

Bottom: Attendees enjoy a game of bean bag toss.



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

- *It was like being in another world, one where we could just focus on ourselves and what is really important in our lives.*
- *My time and experience [at the retreat] will always hold a special place in my heart.*
- *It was such a blessing and inspiration for me.*
- *[The retreat offered] meaningful conversations...and allowed us to share laughter and tears.*
- *[The retreat] provided a safe accepting environment full of hope.*
- *The retreat was planned so well to make each of us feel special and grateful.*
- *I still can't stop talking about it [the retreat]...this weekend I had the experience of a lifetime.*
- *[The retreat] was powerful and uplifting...informative and inspiring.*
- *Lovely restful weekend for me in a gorgeous setting.*
- *Thank you for the most lovely, restful, and restorative weekend.*