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Hope for uninsured breast cancer patients

By Sandra Jordan of the St. Louis American

A best-kept secret in the St. Louis health community is a unique clinic without walls that coordinates top-notch care for breast cancer patients who otherwise could not afford it.



The treatment, at no cost to patients, is made possible through donations of services, medicines, equipment and facilities by highly-experienced physicians, medical personnel, hospitals, pharmaceutical, medical equipment companies, community groups and other organizations.

Gateway to Hope arranges comprehensive treatment for breast cancer patients who are uninsured, lack financial resources and are ineligible for assistance through state and federal programs. Their innovative approach makes it possible for our patients to receive top-notch treatment in professional environments including surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, immunotherapy, hormone and drug therapies as well as a range of essential clinical support services.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in the U.S. with more than 211,000 new cases discovered each year, according to the National Cancer Institute.

“Nowadays, in the year 2008, no woman needs to know how to treat cancer; she doesn’t need to know how to deliver chemotherapy; she doesn’t need to know how to deliver radiation. All she needs to know how to do is drive her car. She can get in her car and get the best medical treatment in the world. However, if you don’t have health insurance—you know, it doesn’t count. It does not matter one bit. You might as well be living in Zimbabwe if you don’t have health insurance. And, it’s a treatable disease—it’s a manageable disease,” St. Louis board-certified plastic surgeon Dr. Melvin Maclin said.

Maclin is on the Gateway to Hope board of directors. He also provides plastic and reconstructive surgery to clients treated through the organization. With the prevalence of breast cancer in the African American community, Gateway to Hope offers itself as a bridge to connect St. Louis women with breast cancer to needed treatment.

“I do it because it’s the right thing to do,” Maclin said. “My particular affection for Gateway to Hope is African American women with breast cancer. African American

women get breast cancer at a significantly reduced frequency as compared to our lighter counterparts, however, when we get it, we get it at a more advanced stage and we make up a larger percentage of what's called 'the working poor.'

Gateway to Hope was founded two years ago by doctors David Caplin and Marlys Schuh. It has at its disposal partners and committed health professionals to provide clinical support in all areas of patient care. Whether the problem is a co-pay/deductible, the skilled hands of a surgeon or the comfort of a therapist, Gateway to Hope has partners to provide solutions. Although its office is located in West St. Louis County, Gateway to Hope is reaching out to women or men with breast cancer in the City of St. Louis to fulfill a need.

"There are individuals who have the disease now and have no idea of what to do or where to go to get taken care of and we provide 100 percent comprehensive care at no charge to the individual. The most it might cost them is gas money to get out here," Maclin said.

Although she did not know it at the time, Tracie Peebles of Florissant met that description. She was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago and needed a mastectomy. She made an appointment to see Dr. Maclin.

"I had a really high deductible through my insurance company—I think it was \$3,500. This was surgery I had to get done, so I was going to work out something with the hospital to get this taken care of," Peebles said.

As she sat in the waiting area, Peebles picked up a brochure in Maclin's office and read about Gateway to Hope. She took the brochure home where she reviewed it again with her sister and made the decision to investigate further.

"I had to get them paycheck stubs and other sources of income to confirm I qualified. I was surprised that I qualified because I know a lot of places like that where your income has to be extremely low to put you in the program," Peebles said. "It gave me a peace of mind knowing that I would not have all of this hanging over my head."

Peebles had a mastectomy by Dr. Marlys Schuh (Gateway to Hope co-founder) and breast reconstruction by Dr. Maclin in June 2006 at Missouri Baptist. She was one of the first Gateway to Hope clients.

"I was in the hospital for six days. I had the TRAM flap where they take tissue from your stomach to rebuild your breast. After that, I had to have a skin graft—that was August '06 and in December '06, I had to have a hernia removed. I estimate it would have cost me out of pocket, maybe \$10,000. The insurance only paid only 80 to 90 percent. For that procedure I didn't have to pay anything," Peebles said.

Berkeley resident Linda Hall ran into trouble when her saline breast implant ruptured a few years after reconstructive surgery from a mastectomy. Her implant was flat in two days—and she was beginning to feel the same about her options.

“I didn’t have any insurance. I called every organization that I could think of and no one could help me,” Hall said. She spoke to someone at Deaconess Hospital, who referred her to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. Komen got her in contact with Gateway to Hope.

“And I finally found my angel, Christine Lyss [program nurse manager]. I told her my story. She took it to Dr. Caplin. He took my case and he did the surgery on August 10 with a gel implant at the St. Louis Surgical Center, and I must tell you they are their mission statement. They are very loving, caring and compassionate,” Hall said. “The nurses they call me at least twice a year to see how I am doing and to schedule me for check ups. They will also schedule me for any of my other annuals, such as mammograms. I could not have been blessed more than to find these people. So whenever they call me to ask me to participate in anything, I am always there because they were there for me.”

Health professionals donate their skills to Gateway to Hope. Missouri Baptist Hospital, Surgical Care Associates and other health care facilities donate space in their facilities for treatment.

Gateway to Hope operates on private citizen donations, fundraising and grants from foundations.

Anyone can make a referral to Gateway to Hope, including family and friends, co-workers, neighbors, patients and health care providers.

A diagnosis of breast cancer can be financially devastating for women, men and their families. It doesn’t have to. In St. Louis, there is a Gateway to Hope.