

Gateway to Hope offers aid to those with breast cancer but no insurance

Suzette Allinger, 56, remembers the day in July of 2008 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Allinger, of the Creve Coeur area, had gone to see Dr. Alan Londe, a general surgeon, after she'd had severe breast pain. His diagnosis of cancer couldn't have come at a worst time.

Allinger, whose husband of 20 years, Justin, had been laid off from retail management the year before. They had no private health insurance.

But with a part-time job in the cosmetics field, she couldn't qualify for Missouri Health Net, Medicaid or other government programs.

"As I was crying a bucket of tears, Dr. Londe told me to take a deep breath and talk to Gateway to Hope," she said. That suggestion changed her life.

Londe is one of many doctors and other medical providers who donate services and products to the non-profit Gateway to Hope.

Based in Creve Coeur, the organization arranges no-cost comprehensive medical care for breast cancer patients who lack sufficient financial resources or insurance, but are ineligible for assistance through state and federal programs.

It was founded in 2005 by Dr. David Caplin, of Frontenac, a plastic/reconstructive surgeon, and Dr. Marlys Schuh of Creve Coeur, an oncology breast surgeon.

Caplin recalls a patient who was the catalyst for establishing the organization.

"This young woman was the sole breadwinner for her kids and disabled husband. She made enough so she wasn't qualified for Medicaid but couldn't afford insurance," he said.

The woman found a lump in her breast, but ignored it for years.

"By the time she was diagnosed, the tumor had spread and she was sick enough so she couldn't work. By then, she finally qualified for Medicaid, but the cancer was incurable and her family was left with no source of income when she died. That was a Eureka moment for me," Caplin said.

Thanks to Gateway to Hope, more than 130 "partner" doctors, nurses, surgical centers, hospitals, drug and medical equipment companies, community groups and other organizations donate a variety of services.

Those can include medical visits, surgeries, medicines, hormone and drug therapies, radiation, transportation to medical appointments, food, utility payments, counseling, childcare and other comprehensive care that, otherwise, could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars per patient.

"Since we started, we have provided comprehensive care to more than 115 women, and we recently helped our first male patient," Caplin said.

Patients must meet eligibility requirements, with yearly income of 200 to 350 percent of the federal poverty level, said Amber Mabie, Gateway program nurse manager.

For example, someone in a four-person household earning from \$44,100 to \$77,175 is eligible.

"We find a way to provide everything, all at no cost to patients," Caplin said.

One of his donors is Dr. Melvin Maclin, of Kirkwood, a cosmetic/reconstructive surgeon who is treating Allinger through Gateway.

"I see 25 patients a day and, if one happens to be from Gateway, it's not a huge impact on my practice. But it's a huge impact on the life of an individual," Maclin said.

Allinger agrees, adding Gateway helps patients navigate the system, coordinating care between doctors and facilities.

"Here, you feel empowered and guided. They make you feel like family," Allinger said.

Caplin originally wanted Gateway to help patients locally.

"But my goal also was to come up with something that can be replicated elsewhere," he said. "If we can save hundreds of lives here, imagine if we got doctors using this program as a template to launch programs in other cities."



Kirkwood resident Dr. Melvin M. Maclin, right, talks with patient Suzette Allinger, center, of the Creve Coeur area, while Amber Mabie looks on. Mabie is program nurse manager and Maclin donates his cosmetic/reconstructive surgery skills to Gateway to Hope.

For more information, visit www.gthstl.org or call (314) 569-1113.