

# Volunteers provide hand, nail massages for cancer patients

By Mary Beth Sammons  
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In Michelle Olson's hospital room, pictures of her four grown children and five grandchildren line the nightstand and corner shelves. Movie DVDs are stacked on a nearby TV cart, and an angel of hope figurine and journal rest on her tray table.

There's also a makeshift spa kit, created from a cardboard drink tray stuffed with nail strengthening and lubricating balms, hand moisturizers and a hot towel wrapped in plastic.

Seated at Olson's bedside are her daughter, Dawn Olson, and Michelle's best friend Linda Zurlinden, both of whom have driven the two hours to Chicago from all three women's hometown of Streator, Ill. The visitors express envy—"We're so jealous!"—at the way Stacey Koerner, a beauty industry specialist, is fussing over Olson, giving the patient a hand and nail massage. Koerner weaves her way around IV cords to apply moisturizer and massage Olson's hands and lower arms.

"I love being pampered," Olson, 51, says. "It just feels so comforting."

The grand finale is a blast of vitamin-enriched cream, which is slathered on Olson's hands and arms and massaged in with a warm towel. It's a scene more likely to occur in a trendy day spa than on the oncology floor at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. But for the past two years, volunteers for "Project Well-Being Spa" have provided the twice-monthly ritual for patients spending time in the 70-bed cancer unit of the Streeter hospital. Some are recovering from surgery while others are undergoing radiation or chemotherapy treatments.

Koerner, who was then the special-events director for Chicago-area Nordstrom stores, helped launch the program with a group of cosmetic salespeople from the Michigan Avenue Nordstrom store after they lost a colleague to cancer. The pals rallied to try to do something to "help others, to do something positive out of the pain," says Koerner, who recently left Nordstrom to start her own specialty beauty events company. Pampering people, Koerner says, which is what they did on a daily basis, seemed the best course.

"We'd all been touched by cancer in some way and wanted to give back," says Koerner, whose mother is a breast cancer survivor. "My mom had it too, and I realized how soothing a massage or facial could be at a time when you just feel so out of control."

Project Well-Being's philosophy is to create healing moments for cancer patients and to pamper them as they cope with catastrophic illness. The program serves about 20 to 30 patients on each spa evening, and has averaged about 500 to 600 patients a year, says Jackie Medland, director of the oncology department at Northwestern.

"Who would think of such an unusual idea for volunteering?" Medland says. "It's great; beauty people at a fancy retail store teaming up with health-care professionals to help people one individual at a time."

About 8 to 10 volunteers come on spa nights from a pool of about 150 in the program.

Volunteers attend a four-hour training program to learn how to care for cancer patients. A social worker also talks to them about how to inter-



Aesthetician Rashida Balogun of Chicago massages the hands of Northwestern cancer patient James Evans before the 41-year-old Bridgeview resident passed away in mid-August.

act and feel comfortable with the patients. A hospital representative talks about precautionary measures volunteers must take, such as wearing gloves and gowns, and all volunteers are tested for tuberculosis and hepatitis B, and must have up-to-date immunizations.

Every first and third Tuesday from 5:30 to 8 p.m., the beauty crew takes to the hospital corridors armed with "spa kits"—hand lotion, warm towels and plastic gloves, carried on cardboard trays that look like fast-food drink holders. They provide 20-minute hand and nail massages that are more therapeutic than aesthetic. No nail polish here. Earlier in the day, volunteers sign up prospective spa clients/patients, and usually there's an equal number of men and women signing up. If the list doesn't fill, the service is opened to caregivers, said Maria Pettis, volunteer coordinator for Northwestern's Palliative Care and the Home Hospice program.

"Everyone needs a break on this floor, it's that intense," Pettis says.

## 'Beware of radiation'

Indeed, concepts like nurture, soothe, rejuvenate and transform are not the first ones to pop into a visitor's mind on this floor, where "beware of radiation" signs are posted on the doorways and bleating monitors, IV cords, and other medical equipment complete the scene.

This rejuvenating moment holds special significance for Olson who was diagnosed in February with bladder cancer, and has undergone multiple major surgeries, including having her bladder removed, only to discover that her remission was short-lived. In late July she learned the cancer returned and spread. Since then the bookkeeper has been hospitalized and is undergoing intensive radiation and chemotherapy treatment.

"I've never really been a spa or massage person, but at the end of the day after a brutal

round of chemo and radiation, you can really depressed and this just helps soothe all and relax me," says Olson. "After weeks in the hospital and knowing what chemo is going to do to my hair and what ahead, it feels good to have a little pamper and a beauty treatment."

## Volunteer finds cheer

For volunteers like T'Lynne Clark, year-old training specialist for Deloitte Touche in Chicago, the bedside spa treatments are a must-not-miss event.

"I came here originally because I was to help people, but it's me who gets cheered up," Clark said. "I am astounded at how beat and cheerful all the patients are. . . very intimate thing to be giving a hand massage. They are all so open and willing to give you anything. You have to realize you are only person who is not poking them something and they really appreciate it learned so much and I go back to work next day a changed person."

The program also has given birth to a larger vision to expand it to outpatient clinics and home health care, both at Northwestern and potentially through other health-care providers, oncology director David said. It is a program that resembles American Cancer Society's "Look Good Feel Better" program, which is designed to help female cancer patients learn how to cope with the appearance-related side effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

Cosmetic vendors have donated products by Project Well-Being, Koerner said. And, other service professionals group including The School of Massage Therapy in Chicago, recently have begun funneling volunteers into the program.

Patient Andrea Rodriguez, a 31-year-old with lupus, has flown into town from Southern California for a two-month stem-cell transplant at Northwestern Memorial for an experimental stem-cell transplant. On this evening is on the eve of four days of intensive chemotherapy, which she is receiving as an alternative treatment for her disease. Her body aches and one of her arms is numb.

"This is the first thing that has felt good that helps me relax," Rodriguez said. "I've been dealing with this for so long, I just want to be strong for this week. There's so much to have to deal with ahead. It helps a lot."

As the program enters its third year, Koerner and Medland are working to take it to the next level.

"Our focus is to really take it to the next level of improving the quality of life for patients coping with cancer," said Koerner who is in the process of incorporating a for-profit arm of the program she plans to call The Beauty Prescription. In addition to outpatient and home health care, the beauty experts hope to incorporate facials and haircuts to their spa services.



Northwestern Memorial Hospital patient Andrea Rodriguez receives a hand massage from volunteer Kathy Fanslow.