

ANGEL INVESTORS

CHICAGO-BASED
NONPROFIT IMERMAN ANGELS PROVIDES CANCER PATIENTS
WITH AN EMPATHETIC SUPPORT SYSTEM

BY KIM JEFFRIES



Chicago resident Jon Imerman felt a sharp pain one day, completely out of the blue. Visiting the doctor for what he thought would be a routine check for something minor, he wasn't prepared for what the doctor told him: He had testicular cancer. At 26, he was booked for emergency surgery the next morning and began a five-month chemotherapy regimen the following week.

It was his experience battling the illness that inspired him in 2003—after fighting a relapse a year into remission—to found Imerman Angels, a nonprofit organization dedicated to pairing current cancer patients with survivors. And not just any survivors, but survivors of the same type of cancer, in the same age group and of the same gender.

“During my own treatments, I had so many people in my room—friends, family—but I walked into other rooms and there were so many other people who were fighting cancer, who were having chemo dripped into their bodies all day, with literally no one in the room,” says Imerman, who continued to visit the hospital while in remission to talk with patients. It was then that Imerman realized that a 60-year-old breast cancer patient might find more comfort from a fellow breast cancer survivor her age than a young man like him. “That’s when Imerman Angels really started,” he says.

Now boasting an international network of 630 survivors, Imerman Angels is helping more than a thousand patients (including a thyroid cancer patient in Zambia who e-mails with a Chicago

survivor) by connecting them with a person who’s faced the same illness and beaten it—somebody whose advice and support the patient can directly relate with and benefit from. “What we do is so simple; there’s nothing complicated about it,” Imerman says. “It’s just finding the right people in the same situation and putting them in the same room.”

But services are not just for patients; Imerman Angels also extends partnerships between the loved ones who are helping their friends and family members get through their illnesses. Imerman says the most common caregiver partnership is between parents of sick children. “We have a 2-and-a-half-year-old fighting Leukemia right now, and we introduced the father to another father of a 4-year-old who already beat Leukemia last year,” Imerman says. “Outliving your child—that’s a parent’s worst nightmare, so we’re building that resource, having them talk to another parent whose kid had the same [illness].”

And the organization has no plans to slow down; in fact, their ambitious five-year program has them expanding exponentially by the end of 2012, hoping to offer every single cancer fighter in the U.S. access to a survivor within 24 hours of diagnosis. “We want our literature on every shelf, in every patient room, in every hospital, with every doctor knowing about us, every nurse—everyone,” Imerman says. “We want to make ourselves available to every person out there who’s sick.”

They’re already on track with that goal, setting up their first official office space in River North in October and updating their database with sophisticated software that will allow for automated matches and even more global access. “The No. 1 point I always want to deliver is that it’s not about the donations—obviously they help us grow, but it’s much more about who you know who is sick,” Imerman says. “Who’s sick out there and doesn’t know this free resource exists? Find ways to get them connected, and everything else will fall into line.”

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Imerman Angels hosts a fundraiser and toy drive at John Barleycorn (3524 N. Clark, 773/549-6000) Dec. 7; imermanangels.org