

Partnering with Angels on the Cancer Journey

When Jonny Imerman was undergoing chemotherapy for metastatic testicular cancer in 2001 at the age of 26, he found that although he had a caring network of friends and family, he had no one to talk to his own age with the same type of cancer. “The questions I had were, ‘How tired am I going to get? What can I eat? How much water should I be drinking?’” Imerman said.

As he walked the halls of the oncology clinic, he saw other patients sitting alone in darkened rooms, and Jonny realized that many cancer fighters must have the same feelings of disconnect. “I knew this was not right... I felt guilty because I had so many good people and so much positive energy around me. I made a silent promise that if I were given life after cancer, I would help these people,” he later wrote. Thus, when his therapy ended in 2003, he founded Imerman Angels.

The 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (www.imermanangels.org), headquartered in Chicago, Ill, connects a person fighting cancer with someone who has beaten the same type of cancer. Caregivers (ie, friends or family members of the current patient) are also paired. This connection allows the patient to ask personal questions and enables the survivor to provide support, unique insights, and encouragement. “Cancer fighters have been there [and had] the same challenge with the same cancer and...survived it,” Imerman said. “We’re back to good, we’re back at the gym, we’re in new families, we’re normal people, [and] we do good stuff,” he added about the message the survivors hoped to spread.

Oncology nurses who see their patients struggling or losing hope—or who want to provide their patients with an extremely helpful tool—might consider recommending the services of the organization. To begin, cancer patients, survivors, or caregivers call or e-mail the organization to register themselves in the database. Nonprofit cancer support service providers (such as the American Cancer Society or I’m Too Young For This), friends, or family members also refer patients. Next, a representative calls or meets with the new member, then searches the database to match the fighter with a survivor most like him/her in terms of cancer type, treatments, age, and gender. The organization may connect people across the United States and around the world, as they believe distance does not limit the relationship.

After a suitable match is found, the Imerman Angels representative connects the cancer patient with the survivor. The nature and depth of the relationship is up to the pair. Beyond the partnering, Imerman Angels can provide help in the form of advice related to fertility issues, how tired patients will be after treatment, and how to tell their children about their cancer, Imerman said.

The organization’s mission is for every cancer patient in the United States to have access to a cancer survivor within 24 hours of being diagnosed by January 1, 2013. To date, there are more than 2000 people in the database, assisted by approximately 300 volunteers. There have been almost 1000 matches so far this year, exceeding the estimated 800 connections established in 2008.

Imerman Angels also hosts fundraising events such as marathons run through its Imerman Active group as well as concerts. In the future, Imerman hopes to implement an Imerman Angels Call Center where a group of cancer survivors would be available to answer 1 call after the next. He also hopes to expand and offer similar support to people with other diseases such as diabetes, lupus, and fibromyalgia, he said. ONN

— Traci Dantoni