

# Healing Bonds for Life

*Imerman Angels match  
young adult fighters  
with survivors.*

**BY CURTIS PESMEN**

**Y**OU NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST LOVE. Or, we now know, your first cancer mentor, either. Thanks in part to the Imerman Angels—a broad-based, whip-smart match-support team for young adult cancer patients—the 70,000 patients ages 15-39 who are diagnosed with cancer each year in the U.S. are not nearly so alone as they've been in years past.

Jonny Imerman, 34, a six-year testicular cancer survivor from Chicago, started the nonprofit group specifically to help young survivors through their toughest first-year moments and hours of crisis. In just over six years, he and his colleagues have assembled a database of peer counselors who are both deeply committed and not afraid to, well, spread their wings. They now have served patients (or “fighters,” as Imerman calls them) in all 50 states and in 35 countries, and have expanded their reach to serve those at “any age, any stage,” Imerman says. To date they have recruited more than 2,000 cancer survivors as volunteer mentors.



**MATCH-MAKER.** Jonny Imerman, 34, redefines young adult peer support.

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Sometimes they need to be angry!

## ANGELS IN AMERICA.

Survivors Rynell Cook, Laura Alexander, Katie Blossfield, and Jessica D'Andrea help bridge gaps in cancer fights in all 50 states.

In recent years, Imerman and his crew have reached out to help caregiver-to-caregiver matches take hold. "We can help [cancer] fighters 10 levels deep," he says, "by [performing] matches of age, gender, cancer type, grade level, treatment type, religion, sexual orientation, family, lifestyle, and geography."

Funded by donations (with programming support from the LIVESTRONG Young Adult Alliance and the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults), the Angels' support takes many forms. From chaperoning cancer fighters to their first chemo infusions, to late night calls and Web-based chats about the most mundane—and personal—cancer-related issues, the Angels use their experience to ease the new burdens facing patients. And they take pride in telling it straight.

"We recommend to all of our survivors [counselors] that they 'roll back' to when they were first diagnosed," says Laura Alexander,



a four-year-plus breast cancer survivor who now helps direct Imerman Angels' events and public relations. "Not all fighters want to hear 'cheerleading' all the time," she says. "You need to listen ... and allow them to sometimes say, 'Wait a minute, I need to be angry!'"

It's one thing to have 237 Facebook friends or 119 Twitter followers. It's quite another to have a solid, one-to-one, call-at-3 a.m. survivor pal who knows what it's like to stare at the ceiling, as your hair falls out in clumps on the pillow, matted in tears, wondering how you'll ever get through tomorrow, much less next week, next month. It's a lot to ask of a mentor. But it's partly why the Angels

receive referrals from some of the top cancer hospitals and research centers in the country.

As fighters move through treatment, they find themselves asking increasingly tough questions not just about their cancer, but about going back to school (full time), dating, getting a job back, neuro effects (chemobrain), or trying to sign up (again) for health insurance. What they find, early and often, is: The search for a new normal doesn't have to start alone. It begins at [www.ImermanAngels.org](http://www.ImermanAngels.org). ■

CURTIS PESMEN, author of *The Colon Cancer Survivors' Guide* (Tatra Press), is editor of *LIVESTRONG Quarterly*.

## DOES CUP SIZE MATTER?

SOMETIMES, OFTENTIMES, when a young woman has been diagnosed with breast cancer, she may be as interested in body-image issues after surgery as she is in the biological makeup of medications she's been prescribed. At least at first.

Will she still "feel like a woman" if she loses a breast—or both—to surgery and treatment? What will breast implants *feel* like, if she chooses that option? These concerns, oncologists and counselors say, in turn may be grounded not in vanity but in the healthful, long-term outlooks of many of the 192,000 breast cancer patients diagnosed each year in the U.S.

"We get all kinds of requests with our matches," says Jonny Imerman, 34, founder of the international peer support nonprofit Imerman Angels, a member group of the LIVESTRONG Young Adult Alliance. "Some of our breast cancer fighters even ask to be paired with survivors [counselors] who have had the same type and stage [of cancer], and who happen to have the same cup size. So we'll try to find someone just like that."

"When I was first diagnosed," says Laura Alexander, a near-five-year survivor from Chicago, "I was 35 and single. And losing my hair was the worst thing, my biggest fear. This was partly because I

worked in the TV and modeling industry. So I spent a lot of time trying to 'hide' my cancer from my co-workers: putting my eyebrows 'on'; putting makeup on my yellowed 'chemo' skin."

It took time for other concerns to sink in. Such as whether to opt for lumpectomy or mastectomy following initial treatment. Turns out there was no single right answer. "So I thought long and hard before opting for a lumpectomy," she says. In the end, she says, she made her decision based on both peer and doctors' advice. In the end, body image mattered. But the medical odds of recurrence mattered more.