



Volunteer group helps uninsured cancer patients

Foundation raises money and offers screenings

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David Kadlubowski/The Arizona Republic

Jana Ehler signs Dave Graybill's "Pink Heals" firetruck during a fundraiser Sunday for the Desert Cancer Foundation. Graybill's pink trucks promote appreciation for women with cancer. Money the foundation raises goes directly to help patients.

An uninsured patient who had breast-cancer surgery contacted the Desert Cancer Foundation of Arizona to say, "You saved my life."

It's a story the band of hard-working volunteers has heard before.

A thousand people without health insurance have been screened for cancer with mammograms and prostate exams, thanks to the foundation.

The group raises money through donations, grants and fundraisers, like the wine-tasting and silent auction Sunday in Chandler that drew nearly 300 people.

The foundation also works with physicians and health agencies to provide follow-up care, and it is soon expanding to provide screening for skin cancer. At one prostate screening, out of 25 men, five went on to get biopsies.

The foundation has no paid staff and no office, so with no overhead, the funds directly help patients. There is only the cost of a cellphone that volunteers answer.

"It sounds disorganized, but we accomplish amazing things," said Paula Wirth, a former board president who survived a bout with a rare, aggressive cancer.

"We know the struggles," she said. "Some of us are cancer survivors and we know the disease itself, but add on to that, these folks don't have insurance and . . . it would be overwhelming. When I was going through mine, I can't imagine having to pay for things in addition to getting well."

Since the economy soured, fundraising has been difficult, and the need is greater since so many people have lost jobs and health insurance.

Still, the foundation raises \$50,000 a year, "and we pretty much spend it," Wirth said.

The group also has an endowment of more than \$100,000.

The organization began on a shoestring 14 years ago, crafted by four women in a service organization, Soroptimist International of the San Tans.

The founding president was Carole Weishaar of Mesa, who had survived late-stage ovarian cancer. She led the group for five years and is still active.

"What I need to do is make my life count," Weishaar said. "I need to do something to give back for the life I got back."

The first physician to sign on to help the foundation was Edgar Hernandez, who is still the group's chief medical adviser.

"Dr. Hernandez is very humble, but truly I don't think we would exist without him," Wirth said. "He's so instrumental in helping us go in the right direction and connecting us with other physicians."

"When a mammogram needs to be read and the person does not have a physician, which happens quite often, he reads all the reports we send him for free, and if a woman needs surgery, he does the surgery for free. Over the years, he has done hundreds."

Hernandez, who several years ago was chief of staff, chief of surgery and a board member at Chandler Regional Medical Center, praises the foundation volunteers.

"You should see the energy these women have," he said. "They're so limited in how much they can do, but to look at them work so hard for people that have nothing, I could never say no to them."

In 2009 and 2010, Wirth underwent seven months of aggressive chemotherapy at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston for primitive neural-ectodermic tumors, or P-NET.

While she was there, she received a surprise visit from Glendale Firefighter Dave Graybill and his crew on two pink firetrucks, symbols of an international movement he began called "Pink Heals," to promote appreciation for women with cancer.

Graybill played baseball on the U.S. Olympic team in 1984 and played several years with the Montreal Expos organization.

"We're waging a war against a terrorist called cancer," said Graybill, whose visit in Houston appears on YouTube.

His first firetruck was bought in 2007 with a check for \$13,000 from Karen Hechler of Glendale.

Twenty-one chapters of his organization, Guardians of the Ribbon, have 40 pink firetrucks around the United States and in Canada. More are in the works.