

Issue Date: View December 2007, Posted On: 11/16/2007

GIVING ON THE MAIN LINE: Big Hearts

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Jill Durovsik

Twenty-five years ago, right around the time the Wellness Community was putting down roots in Santa Monica, Calif., it was rare for cancer victims to talk openly about their illness. Support groups as we know them today were practically non-existent. And for the most part, patients and their families had few outlets for their questions and fears.

Around that time, Villanova's Jill Durovsik learned that her mother had terminal lung cancer. "She was so isolated," says

Durovsik. "She didn't have a place to talk about her feelings with others going through the same thing. I could be there for her and listen, but I couldn't truly get what she was experiencing emotionally. It's really

Photos by [Carlos Alejandro](#)

hard to understand someone else's fear of dying."

It was during her mother's battle that Durovsik first heard about the Wellness Community, a nonprofit organization offering a multitude of support services to cancer patients and their families and caregivers. Her initial introduction was through *It's Always Something* by Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in 1989 at the age of 42. In the book, Radner conveyed the center's positive impact on her emotional well-being, which prompted Durovsik to explore services for her mother.

Five years later, she met Connie Carino, who invited her take a leading role in founding the Philadelphia branch ([twcp.org](#)). Durovsik's dedication to the Wellness Community since then has been remarkable even for someone directly affected by cancer. Board chair, she clocks an average of 25-30 hours per week as one of the organization's most prominent spokespeople, fundraisers and cheerleaders. And she and husband Tom have offered generous financial support on a personal level.

Recently, Durovsik was appointed chair of the National Cancer Survivorship Training and Research Institute, a job rivaling that of a corporate CEO (minus the paycheck) and elevating her work to full-time status. While some might feel daunted by such a weighty undertaking, Durovsik greets it with gratitude. "I feel so fortunate that this can be a job for me and that I can do it for free," she says. "It's a great thing."

The institute's launch this year coincides with the Wellness Community's 25th anniversary and celebrates the organization's commitment to cost-free, community-based, patient-active support and psychosocial wellness for all types of cancer patients, no matter what stage of the disease they're in. "Our mission is to elevate psychosocial wellness and survivorship as the national gold standard," says Durovsik. "We have 25 sites around the country and a front-row seat to the positive impact this type of support has on patients. If we can prove to an

insurance company that psychosocial support equates to reduced medical needs and benefits, we can get more money for cancer patients and, ultimately, better services."

The institute will serve as a national training center for Wellness Community staff and outside professionals specializing in oncology and other chronic illnesses. On the research end, the goal is to conduct cutting-edge studies and incorporate the findings into patient programs. Durovsik wants to transform the institute into a self-sustaining entity within three years. Topping her to-do list is finding a location (the Fairmount Park area is a distinct possibility), an architect and a builder, and assembling an experienced staff and a talented board, all while helping to raise the annual \$1.5 million for operations.

"It's such a relief for people to come here and not have to worry about that aspect of their cancer," says Durovsik of the Wellness Community's free services, which include yoga, tai chi, scrap-booking, art classes, writing workshops, medical seminars, professionally supervised therapy meetings and more. "I just brought a friend here, and to see her get excited about the workshops—to see her eagerness—it was rewarding."