

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday September 30, 2002

Health & Science

www.philly.com

## For cancer patients, help in park setting

**By Aparna Surendran**  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Tears come into Carol Dawkins' eyes as she talks about her mastectomy, a result of breast cancer. At first, she didn't want to look at her chest, she says. Now, when she does, she experiences a sense of loss.

"I look at myself and I see two scars where my breasts were," the 54-year-old woman from West Philadelphia says. "There is a certain sadness... ." Unable to go on, Dawkins wipes her eyes as Mattie Wilkerson, whose lymphoma is in remission, holds and pats her hand.

Dawkins and Wilkerson, who is 58 and lives in Northeast Philadelphia, are sitting in a cancer support group at the Wellness Community of Philadelphia, a nonprofit center in West Fairmount Park that offers free weekly group meetings for cancer patients and, separately, for their families and friends.

Participants in the support groups, led by licensed psychotherapists, may continue for up to two years after treatment, program director Kathleen Coyne said. After that, they can move to a "wellness connection group" for people who want to keep in touch with others who have had cancer.

The Wellness Community was founded 20 years ago in Santa Monica, Calif., by Harold Benjamin, the husband of a breast-cancer patient. The Philadelphia center, one of 21 Wellness Communities in the United States and two overseas,

began in 1993 and moved to its present site in 1997, when it signed a 40-year lease (\$1 a year) with the city, said Patricia Wellenbach, the center's executive director. Funding comes mainly from corporate and private donations.

The center offers classes ranging from Tai Chi (Fridays at 9:30 a.m.), Yoga & Meditation (Thursdays at 1:15 p.m.) and Wellness Workout (Tuesdays at 10 a.m.) to Drumming and Shamanic Journeying.

It also provides a special program for children whose family members have cancer. The children's group meets weekly for six weeks, four times a year.

About 200 people a month attend the various programs and services at the group's Suzanne Morgan Center, or take part in more limited offerings in Bucks and Chester Counties.

The Fairmount Park center, a historic site in a serene setting, includes a house with meeting rooms, a library, and a children's room. There are also a barn, where special events are held, and 4.4 acres of ground for activities such as tai chi.

All programs are designed to help people come to terms with cancer and to give them hope.

"If people participate in their own care and own healing, they will enhance their quality of life," Coyne said. "They will feel less alone and more in control of what's happening to them."

"They see other people going through similar situations, and they are surviving and coping... . If you feel hopeful and think you can get through whatever happens to you,

you can get through treatment better," Coyne said.

Back at Dawkins' cancer support group, Rachel Fiol was explaining that coping with thyroid cancer and uterine leiomyosarcoma, a cancer of smooth muscle cells in the uterus, had been especially difficult. Her uterus was removed in April 2001, and she has suffered from depression.

"Someone said I should take better care of myself," said Fiol, 36, of West Philadelphia. "But the hardest thing is [not] having control of my body."

Fiol said she appreciated the cancer support group because the other members give her "acceptance and understanding."

"My husband is very supportive," she said. "But he doesn't know what I'm really going through."

"I've learned to talk to my doctors," she said.

Dominic Roberti, 69, of Haverford, talked about how things he had learned at the Wellness Community - proper diet, exercise, meditation - helped him.

"My outlook in life became more spiritual, calm, relaxed," said Roberti, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer. "Now my life is much more focused."

Added Dawn Urso, 35, of Newtown Square, who was treated for Hodgkin's lymphoma: "They don't try to make it better. They just listen."

**the  
wellness  
community**  
philadelphia