

Life after cancer: Two programs work in tandem to help patients get strong, live healthy



Kim Aldrich did everything right to be healthy. She was physically active. She ate organic food. She even taught aerobics. Then one day, without any symptoms, she was diagnosed with breast cancer that had moved into her lymph nodes.

After a year of treatments — chemotherapy, surgery, then radiation — Aldrich felt depleted, both physically and emotionally. And alone.

“When one is finished with treatment, there’s a sense of being kicked to the curb because you just spent a year where everything was about you and you were monitoring everything closely — and then, all of a sudden, it’s not,” the Port Ludlow resident says.

Lorraine Glover, of Bainbridge Island, had a similar experience. A recently retired clinical worker for

the Suquamish Tribe, she was in great shape. She taught a Healthy and Whole group for 17 years. She participated in Camino De Santiago, a 500-mile walk across northern Spain.

“I was in quite a shock when I was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer... because I felt I was in the best shape I’d been in a while,” Glover says.

During treatment, which also involved surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, Glover felt she was doing something powerful to fight cancer. When everything was finished, she felt overwhelmed and uncertain what to do next to regain her strength.

“When I stopped treatment, it was one of the most difficult parts of the whole process, because you’ve been swept along, doing what you needed to do,”

she says. “And then, when you’re done, what are you supposed to do, just wait?”

The two women found the support they needed in Strength After Cancer, a wellness and education program at Kitsap Physical Therapy & Sports Clinics (KPT) that’s focused on fitness and wellbeing for cancer survivors. Typically covered by medical insurance, Strength After Cancer helps both men and women reduce the likelihood of lymphedema, create a post-cancer exercise routine and transition or return to a healthy lifestyle.

Strength After Cancer offers patients that first step as they transition back to a healthy lifestyle.

“It made a huge difference because there’s this overwhelming thought of where to start to begin getting my strength back,” Glover says. “It felt like such a big, intimidating mountain to climb.”

After completing Strength After Cancer, both women joined Survive and Thrive, a 12-week program that supports and empowers women who have completed cancer treatment. The donor-funded program runs under the auspices of Peninsula Cancer Center and is more rigorous than Strength After Cancer. In addition to focusing on nutrition and exercise, Survive and Thrive gives women a peer-support network.

It was that support that especially helped Aldrich become stronger not only physically but also emotionally. She says the women of Survive and Thrive provided the camaraderie, motivation and encouragement she needed. She enjoyed it so much, she recently began another session.

“Having a group of women who understand and have been through or are still going through cancer, who are strong and amazing — and watching them be fierce and determined to survive — is very exciting,” Aldrich says.

Aldrich and Glover are among many local women who have transitioned from Strength After Cancer to Survive and Thrive.

“Strength After Cancer was developed as a stepping stone to the Survive and Thrive program,” says Kara Bermensolo, a KPT physical therapist who founded Strength After Cancer.

Bermensolo was volunteering for Survive and Thrive during sessions at Crossfit, one of the two gyms used by the program. She noticed that, as a general rule, the women were deconditioned following their cancer treatments. She approached Dr. Berit Madsen, of Peninsula Breast Center and co-founder of Survive and Thrive, with the idea of developing a cancer rehabilitation program similar to those for cardiac rehabilitation.

“These programs facilitate improving flexibility, strength, balance and aerobic capacity following highly involved medical treatments, which often develop secondary issues related to the aftermath of the treatments,” Bermensolo says. “The patient’s cancer is technically cured but patients often are left with this sense of ‘what now?’”

The idea behind Strength After Cancer was to serve as a stepping stone for Survive and Thrive, and Dr. Madsen loved it. She says it’s common for cancer patients to feel “wiped out” after treatment.

“They’ve been through surgery and maybe some chemotherapy and radiation, not to mention a psychological blow if they can’t exercise,” says Dr. Madsen, a radiation oncologist. “The idea is to try to get them back to feeling good again. What we found over the years is that a lot of people aren’t quite ready for a rigorous program like Survive and Thrive, so it’s great to refer them to a program like Strength After Cancer because it’s supervised and it’s one-on-one.”

Women don’t have to go through Strength After Cancer first if they’re strong enough. Madsen says staff can help assess whether the patient is ready for Survive and Thrive.

Both Glover and Aldrich are thankful for the two programs, and have been reaching their new goals. A year after she completed treatment, Glover still has some lingering side effects, but she’s back to being physically active, traveling and hiking around the world. “Without those programs, I don’t know if I would have had the ability by myself to get back on track as quickly and go forward,” she says. “They were instrumental in getting me through that critical period after treatment.”

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