

View from Downers Grove (12/29/05)
By Elaine Johnson

It happened again. Once again, a woman in the apparent bloom of health and vitality received the diagnosis every woman dreads.

But there is good news here, too—wonderful news snatched from the most bitter. Not only is the prognosis excellent, but the road back to health won't be traveled alone. There is a community of well-wishers, a neighborhood full of friends to lend comfort and support every step of the way.

Even before the surgery took place, several weeks worth of meals had been coordinated and a calendar of daily get-well messages scheduled. And on the cold winter morning when the woman and her husband made their way down the street en route to the hospital and the surgical suite, pink ribbons fluttered on every tree between their home and the corner—a silent but heartfelt testimony to the concern and caring spirit of a neighborhood.

God, I love this place.

It may have one of the highest breast cancer rates in the country, but it also has the warmest heart. Over the years, I've watched this community's women—for the art of care-giving so often falls to women—support, encourage and nurture each other in a way that even the closest family members often can't manage.

“The out-pouring of support from people is overwhelming,” said a friend who happily overcame her own brief battle with cancer. “People whom you didn't realize even knew you send flowers, cards, dinners, books, movies, and words of encouragement and support. It's really the most amazing thing and it really does make you feel better and, I believe, helps to speed the healing process to know so many people are there for you.”

There are some storied blocks in Downers Grove, streets where neighbors regularly socialize and look out for each other the way Americans seldom do anymore. But even if your block isn't famously congenial, the community that surrounds you most emphatically is.

In just my own little neighborhood, I have witnessed groups of women produce weeks and weeks worth of meals for an ailing or bereft neighbor, send cards, small gifts and flowers on a daily basis to women struggling through months of chemotherapy, organize a festive “hat party” to present stylish headgear to a friend who was losing her hair due to treatment.

I know women who have walked 60 miles in the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer in honor of a stricken friend, and another group who are already planning to participate in next year's event in honor of our most recently diagnosed neighbor.

I have watched a woman repeatedly tend neighbors who suffered devastating illness and devastating loss, finding in that exercise of support and faith a new calling in the chaplaincy.

These stories don't all have happy endings. Life doesn't promise that. But there is a mutual resiliency and compassion that is born out of giving and caring and being steadfast as a community through whatever life metes out.

This is a gift exercised not only in illness, but during other transitions and challenges as well. One woman's difficult move out of state was salvaged by her many friends' efforts to let her know the bonds of friendship can accommodate the distance. A musician whose equipment was stolen received a small and totally unexpected windfall to help with replacement. After a teacher broke her leg in an accident, a mom took up a collection to provide cleaning service while she was on the mend.

I, too, recall the consideration of friends. During six weeks of bed-rest during my second pregnancy, my friends in the Downers Grove Junior Women's Club brought meals and kept in touch with regular phone calls and visits that helped my spirits immeasurably. From that time forward, I promised myself I would never overlook an opportunity to help in that same way.

There are other ways the women and men of this town are committed to helping and caring, through clubs and foundations and organizations created and funded by volunteers. And there are the countless small ways we help each other, too, with everything from a word of encouragement to help with the kids to a daily prayer.

As we embark on a new year that will hold its own share of abundance and sorrow, what a great gift it is that we share the journey with so many good people. In an e-mail following his wife's successful surgery, our neighbor wrote of their sincere appreciation for the blessings of friendship.

"If anyone tries to tell you that the original spirit of the holiday season has been lost in the commercialism of today, you need only look in the mirror to know that it is alive and well."

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