

## *Life After Cancer: Healing The Unknown Toll*

Written by: Jessica Lindsey

Issue: March 2011 | NSIDE Medical

***The SLEW Wellness Center in San Antonio provides mental, physical and emotional healing for the economically disadvantaged.***



When Olga Young, founder and executive director of the Support Lending for Emotional Wellbeing, or SLEW, Wellness Center in San Antonio, found herself on the other side of a severe bout with breast cancer, she saw a need for after-care services in the city. And despite a lack of any medical training or start-up funds, she set about filling it anyway.

The story of surviving breast cancer is a long and difficult one that millions of Americans go through on an annual basis. It begins with biopsies and surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, but it does not end there. Cancer takes a physical, emotional and mental toll on those whom it afflicts – even long after the last chemotherapy session.

Young left a 17-year career at Southwestern Bell Company when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“I had never known someone with cancer, and didn’t know what I was about to go through,” she said. “I’m what you would call a workaholic, and I told my boss it would only be a few weeks. He wisely told me to take as much time as I needed.”

While not every patient goes through additional complications from cancer and the accompanying treatment, Young certainly did. Doctors had to remove three disks from her neck, and she suffered temporary paralysis and heart complications. She also found herself in need of other services, like massage therapy. She knew she was fortunate to be among those who have the insurance and means to pay for those services, unlike many in the San Antonio area.

“I felt something needed to be done,” Young said. “With much prayer, I decided to start a wellness center where those without insurance could come take full advantage of those extra services for free.”

In its first year, SLEW had the good fortune of donated office space, but it had no other funding. So Young and her small team of volunteers hit the pavement seeking donations. They garnered a small grant from the city council for supplies – mostly wigs and prostheses. Funding proved difficult to come by, and in the beginning, Young’s staff were all volunteers, including a social worker, a massage therapist and a nurse.

Then SLEW got a windfall: a grant from the San Antonio affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

"The grant from Komen San Antonio was instrumental in our start, and they continue to be one of our largest sources of funding," Young said. "I don't know where we would be today without them."

SLEW provides four main areas of service: mental health counseling, massage therapy, lymphatic drainage therapy and wig/bra/prosthetic fittings. Each service is provided completely free of charge to any patient who qualifies. (Patients must prove they are at 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.)

A professional psychotherapist provides mental health counseling for patients at SLEW. It is an important part of the healing process, as these patients are not only fighting the emotional toll of the disease itself, but many are dealing with difficult financial situations often caused by cancer. Lost jobs, families to feed and large medical bills can add up quickly for a cancer patient at the poverty level.

Massage therapy for cancer patients is not a luxury. It is a necessity. Long-term drugs that help keep the cancer at bay can also cause chronic pain and stiffness, as well as severe rheumatoid arthritis.

SLEW provides wig, bra and prosthetic fittings for all patients – both a physical and emotional kind of therapy.

"When you have to go through surgery and chemotherapy, you feel like you lose parts of who you are," Young said. "You look in the mirror, and you see someone you don't know, and regaining at least a small part of that is significant for recovery."

Lymphatic drainage therapy was made possible by the Komen San Antonio grant. Breast cancer patients often need this service, as the disease is usually diagnosed through the lymph nodes. Once those lymph nodes are taken out, they do not work properly and can cause severe swelling, a lifelong side effect for many.

"This service is very difficult to find in the city if you don't have insurance," Young said. "We are the only center in the city that will do it for free."

The SLEW Wellness Center provides more than 500 services per month, which is a large task for such a small agency. Its clients are nearly all low-income, and either under-insured or completely uninsured.

"We have become like family to many of our patients," Young said. "We celebrate with them, cry with them and just love on them. For some, we are the only support system they have, and we make sure they know they don't have to go through this alone."

*For more information about the SLEW Wellness Center, call 210-654-7900 or visit [www.slewellness.org](http://www.slewellness.org).*

