A Time of Gratitude

Welcome to the fourth issue of the GildaGram! Our annual Gilda’s Run/Walk recently wrapped up and it is always an inspiring day. In addition to raising essential support for our programs, it brings our community together around a common cause: So that no one faces cancer alone.

It is just one example of how it truly “takes a village” to provide free cancer support. As we enter this season of thanks, we are so grateful for everything that you do to make sure that our red doors are always open to anyone touched by cancer.

Best wishes,

Marc was one of those young adults. He heard the words, “You have cancer,” when he was just 26. At the time, he found Gilda’s Club’s Young Survivors group to be a source of strength and community. “It was so helpful to not feel isolated and to meet so many other people my age that were worried about the same thing,” he shares.

Now, 10 years later, he has joined the Gilda’s team as the new Adolescent and Young Adult Program Coordinator and Outreach Assistant. Marc’s role is part of a new initiative to expand what we offer to adolescents and young adults, defined as those who are under 40 when they receive a cancer diagnosis.

This population faces unique needs during their cancer journey, such as a tendency to be diagnosed with more aggressive and rare cancers, all while also worried about their growing careers, getting married, and having children.

Our expanded programming works to better address those needs. This will include a focus on experiential activities to give members a sense of confidence. As Kirsten Norslien, Gilda’s Program Director, explains, “Stretching your comfort zone really facilitates personal growth.”

One example of this is a wellness retreat coming up in November.

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Attendees of the Midwest Young Adult Cancer Conference create a community art project.

A Sense of Confidence
Expanded Programming for Young Adults

In their 20’s and 30’s, most young adults are busy building their careers, furthering their education, getting married, buying houses, and having children. For some young adults, they are also facing a cancer diagnosis.

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Then they received the news that would change their lives: Maggie had breast cancer. “It was shocking,” explains Luke, “But at the time we were pretty positive.” They felt fortunate to have caught the cancer early.

Their medical team recommended Gilda’s Club, and Maggie began to attend different groups. While they had supportive friends and family, they didn’t know anyone else going through the same thing. “[Gilda’s Club] was more than a tool, more than a resource. Finding people that you can identify with was a challenge. Gilda’s Club filled that gap in our lives.”

Then they received the devastating news that Maggie had metastatic disease. They were told there was no cure, no options. “That’s not a situation you are ever prepared for,” says Luke.

“Being able to have tear-filled conversations with people who are in the same situation….it allowed her to catch her breath and somehow draw the strength to get through each day.”

Throughout it all, Maggie retained her sunny disposition and determination. “We knew we wanted to experience life…but we knew we had a short window,” Luke shares. Maggie continued to work and raise their children throughout it all. Each morning, she would wake up to give her daughters a kiss before they went to school, even as she was undergoing brutal experimental treatments. She continued to share her mantra: “Clear eyes, full heart, can’t lose.”

And Maggie stayed involved with Gilda’s Club. Luke explains, “Being able to have tear-filled conversations with people who are in the same situation….it allowed her to catch her breath and somehow draw the strength to get through each day.”

Maggie also continued to advocate for Gilda’s Club, and became a part of Gilda’s Run/Walk. “We couldn’t change anything, but we could continue to fight for research and support,” Luke describes.

It’s been three years since Maggie passed away, and Luke and his family have stayed involved with Gilda’s Run/Walk every year. “I’d be remiss as a partner and father to not stay involved in that event,” he shares. They have also held a volleyball tournament each year as a fundraiser for metastatic breast cancer research.

“I’d like to think we’re doing OK. Her energy and love and passion…that’s not a void you can fill. We try to walk through every day together. There’s not a day that goes by that we don’t try to live like Maggie.”
Gilda’s Gets Colorful

Between our Noogieland murals being completed, our fall Art Show featuring works from our members and friends, and art therapy, Gilda’s has been filled with the creative spirit! A huge thank you to our mural designer Molly Linn-Miller and the dozens of volunteers and members who helped bring them to life!

Upcoming Public Events at a Glance

- Guided Painting: Sat., Nov. 2nd at 9:30 am at the clubhouse: Here’s your chance to take one of those painting classes you see others doing. Be guided through a painting demo. Learn a few techniques and follow along in any way you choose.

- Laughter Club: Mon., Nov. 18th at 6:00 pm at the clubhouse. Madison Laughter Club returns after a long hiatus. Laughter is seriously good for you. Come, experience it yourself.

- Volunteer 101: Mon., Dec. 16th at 5:30 pm at the clubhouse. This gives you an opportunity to tour the clubhouse, learn more about our program, ways in which you may want to become involved, and specific steps to get started.

To register or see our complete calendar of events, visit our website: www.GildasClubMadison.org or call (608)828-8880.

A Sense of Confidence

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The day-long retreat will include hiking, yoga, a cooking class, and more....all focused on taking care of yourself. The retreat is already almost at capacity. “Engaging people with activities and nourishment is huge,” explains Norslien.

Marc and Kirsten have also been connecting with healthcare systems to help them understand the unique survivorship needs of young adults, and looking beyond just their immediate medical needs to their long-term emotional and physical well-being.

This new initiative will help us continue our geographic growth beyond the Madison area. In fact, our next annual Midwest Young Adult Cancer Conference will take place in Milwaukee on April 25, 2020.

This expanded programming would not have been possible without support from a generous anonymous donor.

The annual Midwest Young Adult Cancer Conference brings together some of the 70,000 young adult cancer survivors in the Midwest.
A Sense of Control

“Receiving a cancer diagnosis is kind of like going to grad school in three days. When people understand more about what’s going on, it takes away the fear of the unknown and gives them a sense of control,” explains Kirsten Norslien, Gilda’s Club Program Director.

Educational programming at Gilda’s Club is a key part of what we do: Helping our members become more knowledgeable and empowered during their cancer journey.

The goal of our educational programming is to make things more understandable and digestible. As Kirsten explains, it’s our job to translate the jargon.

Anyone, at any stage of cancer, can attend our educational workshops, and most are open to the public. No question is off limits. “It’s all OK at our educational workshops,” explains Kirsten.

In 2020, pending funding, some exciting new educational series are planned. The “awkward questions” series will discuss intimacy and sexuality, mental health and cancer, and ostomies. A series on money and cancer will cover estate planning, insurance appeals, advanced directives, and financial planning.

The educational workshops aim to help people make more informed decisions during their cancer journey, to be able to answer questions such as “Should I participate in a clinical trial?”

Do you want to support our educational programming? Contact Lindsey at (608)828-8862 or lindsey@gildasclubmadison.org to learn how.

We are extremely fortunate to have incredible professionals who are willing to donate their time to share their expertise. Thank you to the dozens of volunteers who have led workshops in 2019, and to the many more that will provide their expertise in 2020!

Joanna Bull, psychotherapist to Gilda Radner and one of the founders of Gilda’s Club, spoke at Gilda’s Club Madison last year.