



# Healing Touch for Breast Cancer Patients

BY KATHY TURNER, RNC, NP, CHTP

*Healing Partners is an example of community service at its best. It brings together Stanford staff, volunteer health care providers, and multiple sites in the medical center and the surrounding area to offer ongoing energy work to women diagnosed with breast cancer.*

Healing Partners pairs women diagnosed with breast cancer with Healing Touch volunteers who provide free, weekly sessions to their partner for six months.

Healing Touch is a gentle, non-invasive form of energy-balancing work that promotes deep relaxation; it is used to help manage the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation, such as fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, pain and lymphedema. It is offered as an adjunct to conventional cancer treatment. Developed by Janet Mentgen, RN, BSN, in 1989 as a nursing education program, Healing Touch is unique among the various types of energy work in having a rigorous certification process which includes five progressive levels of training and a mentored apprenticeship. The training is open to all health care professionals and to lay individuals desiring an in-depth understanding of energy-based concepts. Because of its nursing focus, Healing Touch has an explicit Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Healing Partners was modeled on two similar programs: Bosom Buddies at the Queen's Medical Center in Hawaii and Healing Buddies in Denver. From its inception in August, 2004, Healing Partners moved forward rapidly, receiving administrative and financial support from Women's Health at Stanford, an interdisciplinary program at the medical school focusing on research, education and clinical care. After the program obtained Institutional Review Board approval and was reviewed by the medical counsel's office, we offered our first weekend training for 25 Healing Touch volunteers in January, 2005. Since most of these initial volunteers were not nurses, the in-depth training covered the medical, emotional, energetic, professional and ethical aspects of working with patients. After completing the training, each volunteer was paired with an experienced mentor and required to attend monthly education and support meetings.

#### **A Dedicated Staff of Volunteers**

The enthusiasm and dedication of the volunteer staff has been tremendous. We began distributing brochures about the program through the Stanford Cancer Center, the Community Breast Health Project and other clinics and offices in the area, and in February, 2005, our first pair of

partners was matched. As of this writing, 23 participants have been matched with a provider.

A significant challenge at the start of the program was finding a variety of sites for the sessions in different locations and at different times to accommodate the availability of both the participants and the providers. Area YMCAs were the first to donate space, soon followed by a number of medical and bodywork offices. Our primary site is the Stanford Center for Integrative Medicine, which has a large number of treatment rooms it makes available to us in the evenings and on weekends. Healing Partners could not exist without the generous donations of these Community Partners.

**"When a community pulls together to reach out to those in need, it is a learning experience for everyone."**

—Paula, Healing Partners participant

#### **Deep Relaxation Promotes Healing**

Healing Partners participants often cite the experience of deep relaxation as one of the most valuable effects of their Healing Touch sessions. Liane, who began participating in Healing Partners just after finishing her chemotherapy and radiation treatment, was experiencing fatigue, insomnia, hot flashes and apprehension about returning to work.

"Following each session, I feel...totally relaxed with this intense feeling of being 'in the moment.' I can walk into my session with a thousand things swirling around in my head, and all of it is wiped away by the end of the session. I feel thoroughly unburdened. It's also a real treat to have someone totally focused on me, my needs, and what I am feeling at the time."

For some participants, the Healing Partners session is the one hour each week when they have permission to let go of the stress related to the discomfort, logistics and uncertainty of their diagnosis and treatment. Some report a reduction of physical symptoms, increased ease of tolerating procedures, and a recovery from surgery more rapid than expected.

When Paula started with Healing Partners, she was in physical pain related to her treatment and was experiencing emotional ups and downs. "It has helped my pain but more importantly, it has helped me to sleep better. Sleep is so rejuvenating. When I am rested, I am mentally and emotion-



*Healing Touch volunteer Julie Morrison demonstrates Healing Touch on Paula Callahan, Healing Partner.*

ally stronger. When I was ill, it was difficult to make rational decisions. The faster I healed physically and emotionally, the better I could take care of my family and myself. And now, I will be volunteering some of my services for others – I have decided to enroll in the Healing Touch training program.”

#### Rewards for Volunteers

The providers receive great benefit, as well, from their participation in the program. Working with their partner enables them to use their skills in a way that will truly make a difference in someone’s life. Ellen DiNucci has been paired with her partner for the past four months. “I thought this would be a great opportunity to give back to the community and have positive impact on an individual’s quality of life,” she said. Providers are often moved by their partner’s courage and commitment. DiNucci describes her partner as “very focused, brave and open.”

Kathryn Davis, who is close to completing six months with her partner, describes “witnessing the grace and determination that is possible when a woman deals with a life-changing event like cancer. My partner is amazing, so vital and engaged in doing whatever she can to heal and stay healthy. We have so many laughs, and I have to believe her sense of humor has a lot to do with her healing.”

There is a research component to Healing Partners: We are monitoring the effect of Healing Touch on the physical symptoms, mood and quality of life of participants. Recently, Healing Partners received a generous grant from the Avon Foundation and a gift from a private donor; these will fund the program for the next two years. One of our goals during that time will be to identify areas for more focused, rigorous research and submit research proposals to the National Institutes of Health and private foundations.

Collaborative spirit, specialized training and heart-centered care are the essential components responsible for the success of Healing Partners. As Kathryn Davis observes, “You know you are involved with something special when all the pieces come together as they did for Healing Partners. We have had great inspired leadership in the Healing Touch community, the location resources that have emerged, the support of Stanford, and then this large population of eager Healing Touch volunteers, amazing! I’m really proud of our ability to reach so many women so quickly. Providing weekly sessions at no cost to participants and working with a diverse population – I couldn’t have imagined this a year ago.” We are grateful to everyone in the community for their contributions to this effort.

For information about Healing Touch classes, contact Annet Dragavon at the Creative Awareness Project, (650) 289-9475.

*Kathy Turner, RNC, NP, CHTP, is Director of Healing Partners. For more information about the program, go to <http://womenshealth.stanford.edu/healingpartners.html>.*



*Kathy Turner, RNC, NP, CHTP, Director of Healing Partners, and Jim Batterson, Executive Director of Women’s Health at Stanford.*