

FULFILLING

a Dream, and a Mission

LINDA MURPHY AND MYRNA PORTER OF WELLNESS PLACE

By Mary Klest

When they first met, Linda Murphy and Myrna Porter learned they were born on the same day, March 29, and possessed the same quote by Emerson: "If you've made a difference in one person's life, you have succeeded." These founders of Wellness Place, the area's largest people-to-people cancer resource center, maintain different personal styles and visions of the future as they decidedly work to the fringe of the organization they founded. One had to step out of her shoes to fulfill the mission, while the other stepped into hers to get the job done. Most agree that it is their passion, a willingness to serve others, and showing appreciation to volunteers and donors that lay at the foundation of their success in transforming an idea into reality. That reality has changed their lives for the better.

People who know Linda Murphy describe her as quiet, soft-spoken, and nurturing. Linda first learned to talk about her cancer experience by speaking with friends and survivors. She is now comfortable as a public speaker for Wellness Place, presenting her ideas with clarity and grace to audiences filled with strangers.

"When we first envisioned Wellness Place, we thought we were doing something for those who would be served by the resources available there. Now I realize we are also offering a venue for those who want to give back," says Linda. She believes everyone wants to give back.

Those who know Myrna Porter reflect on her commitment and leadership skills. "I didn't have a lot of connections. I just talked with people, and they responded," she says of her early efforts to get others involved. She likes fundraising. "I learned to ask people for help, not for myself but for the cause. It was easy because I believed so much in the cause." She adds, "It does require some nerve."

The number of Wellness Place volunteers, donors, and people served has swelled since its opening in 2000. Porter says the key to creating a rewarding volunteer experience is identifying the volunteer's skills and interests and utilizing that in a unique way. A rewarding donor experience, she says, is based on building mutually satisfying relationships. "We cannot say thank you enough," she says.

Who are these women, and what made them turn their attention to creating a cancer resource center?

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PHOTOS: MAGGIE THALHEIMER



Linda Murphy

LINDA MURPHY

Linda Murphy grew up on Chicago's northwest side. She met her high school sweetheart at 16 and three years later married this "fun to be with" man. She was introduced to Daniel Joseph Murphy, a commercial real estate businessman, by a friend, John Sage. "Linda was and is smart, attractive, and wonderful," says Sage. A bachelor until age 35, he appreciates the couple's continuous hospitality, including inviting him to spend Christmases with them.

The Murphys have two sons, a daughter, and five grandchildren, all of whom live nearby. "Family first and foremost," Linda says. The simple pleasures of family life make her feel she has succeeded. A neighbor recounted how Linda's children send Linda flowers just for being a great mom. Her grandchildren greet her with a hug when she shows up to babysit, and she cares for her aging mother who has had cancer twice.

Three years after moving into an idyllic North Barrington setting, surrounded by family and a beautifully landscaped golf course, Linda learned she had breast cancer.

Dr. John Sage, now a family physician in Mt. Prospect, finds Linda's involvement with Wellness Place to be the result of her deep personal experience with cancer and her wanting to fill a gap. "People need more than chemotherapy after a diagnosis," he says. "They need support and assurance as they move through their journey." Like others who know Linda, he was surprised to see her move out of her comfort zone.

Julie Lincoln, co-owner of Catalytic Products in Lake Zurich, is amazed at how her soft-spoken friend becomes animated and full of life when talking about Wellness Place. "She turns into this dynamo of ideas. She focused her energy on giving others the resources she couldn't find."

"I just kept moving forward," Linda says.

After her diagnosis, Linda wanted to meet people who beat the odds. She found them through a local support group and professionally. She had worked as an administrative assistant at the furniture store Walter E. Smithe. She turned to the Smithe brothers' mother, Flo, a breast cancer survivor. "My vision for Wellness Place started during my walks with [Flo]" she says. "There was a turning point when I just felt it was meant to be."

"Linda is clearly *Anam Cara*—the Celtic words for soul friend," says Flo Smithe. "There was no doubt that she had chosen the best medical care available to her. However, it seemed that she wanted to be in the presence of someone who had walked a similar path and to be reassured that she could indeed survive, and even thrive, following surgery and treatment. She talked through some of her doubts, her hopes and her fears, and I did some of the same as well.

"I was deeply touched by her words," Smithe continues. "She thanked me for being there for her and then she said, 'When I get through this, I want to do something to make it possible for others who hear that they have cancer to have someone to turn to. Someone who understands what a cancer patient may be feeling. Someone who is willing to lis-



ten without judging and to promise to always be there for them.' I was stunned by her clarity and resolve."

Linda Murphy and Myrna Porter met one another while attending a local cancer support group. A year passed and Linda was still walking, meeting people she describes as remarkable. "I learned about volunteering and the mind/body connection," Linda says. "I visited the people at Wellness House in Hinsdale, and they told us what we needed to do to get things off the ground."

She and Myrna created a rough business plan. They recruited some volunteers and others who wanted to support the cause. Pat Foglia was one such person. She became interested in what they were proposing after her experience tending to a niece who was dying of colon cancer. "When I met Linda I felt comfortable instantly," says Pat. "She is terrific, well-organized, and one of the best speakers I know. She's also a good listener. She and Myrna Porter had the vision to create Wellness Place. My husband and I are grateful to be in a position to support it."

Having obtained a real estate license and having helped her husband in real estate transactions, Linda focused on finding a space: "I searched for an appropriate building with at least 5,000 square feet and a homelike setting, not clinical." She found one in Palatine.

They had to make a lot of decisions. "I did want to quit at times," Linda recalls. "Then something would happen that re-encouraged me. Something that told me it was meant to be."

"Synchronistic" is the word she uses to describe these moments of intuitive surety.

Linda Murphy likes looking at the big picture. She wonders if the wellness model might blossom by combining resources with similar health centers or by building relationships with corporations. She thinks physicians and businesses are beginning to recognize how beneficial the wellness approach is, saying, "Doctors understand the mind/body connection. Health costs may be reduced through prevention as the baby boom generation ages. There may be benefits to working under one umbrella." She is a connect-the-dots thinker.

She punctuates a lot of her statement with a quick laugh. "I don't know everything. I know a sense of humor is important."

PHOTOS: MAGGIE THALHEIMER



Suzanne D. Foster

MYRNA PORTER

Myrna Porter grew up in a large family of modest means in Western Canada, with an Icelandic mother and an English father. At 21, she came to the United States to work as a flight attendant. It was then she learned the art of serving others. “At that time, people were well served,” she says. “Frequent flyers were treated like kings. I always enjoyed the challenge of assisting passengers that were unhappy and turning the situation around.”

At age 24, she married her husband, Stu. “I was old enough to know what I wanted and independent enough to wait for it,” she says with a laugh. In Stu she found an intelligent man who sometimes acted outlandishly, traits endearing to a conservative young Myrna. She says he is a man she can trust, one she knew would always be in her corner.

They moved to Barrington in 1969 and have lived in the same house ever since, though they now spend a lot of time at a second home in Palm Desert. Myrna has an office upstairs where her desk faces a window overlooking the branches of a mature tree. A photo on her bookshelf shows the dual smiles of Christine Tilles and Pam Reiss, both former presidents of the Wellness Place Auxiliary and now board members.

The Porters have two sons and three grandchildren. One son followed in his father’s footsteps by pursuing a career in the investment business; the other, a neurosurgeon, was perhaps influenced by his mother’s choice to become a registered nurse. “We all love to debate and sometimes loudly,” Myrna smiles. “We frequently laugh about the heated discussions our family had.”

When the youngest of her boys entered school, she began her studies in nursing. Later, she earned her master’s degree in social work and pursued an interest in counseling with a specialty in eating disorders at Alexian Brothers Hospital.

Nine years ago, times got tough in the Porter family. Myrna was diagnosed with breast cancer. “My first reaction was being stunned,” she recalls. “My second reaction was being thankful that I had seen my grandchildren and that my sons were married and settled. Shortly thereafter, I was depressed and worried and wanted to talk to people who had gone through breast cancer. My best friend was in the South of France with us when I lost all my hair in the shower 10 days after chemo. Stu and I sat on the bed overlooking the Mediterranean and cried.”

“Within a few months or maybe even weeks, I came to believe there was a purpose for my diagnosis and that I needed to help the young people that I had gone through chemotherapy with. They hadn’t had a chance to raise their families. What would happen to their children?”

“Like so many others, I had somewhat of a phobia to the hospital. That was where I had my surgery. I wanted a place I could walk into and feel comfortable at any time of the day. I wanted a place where I could talk about my concerns for my family.” Through her community involvement in arts organizations and clubs, Myrna reached out to find others who would help support a regional cancer resource center.

Troubled times came again. Five years later, Stu Porter was diagnosed with prostate cancer. “My husband’s diagnosis was harder for me than



my own was,” Myrna says. It was also more aggressive, according to doctors who told him he had three months to live. Again, the Porters were looking for direction and treatment options. Myrna began an “all-out effort” to form alliances between Wellness Place and other organizations, including UsToo International and TAP Pharmaceutical, to help bolster funding and support for men with prostate cancer.

“Myrna is a passionate, caring person who takes the initiative to see things through,” says Mary McGregor, a family friend whose affiliation with TAP resulted in the company sponsoring the Greater Chicago Prostate Cancer Run Walk n’ Roll for the past three years. Myrna serves as the chair of this event, which is organized through Wellness Place and UsToo International.

“Myrna is a fount of energy,” says Tom Kirk, the CEO of UsToo International and a Wellness Place board member. “She is a very committed and focused leader who works tirelessly to make a difference. She puts caring into action.”

The office is not where Myrna hangs her hat. At last year’s Prostate Walk, she could be seen wearing a rain parka driving a golf cart back and forth providing supplies to those who needed it. “Nothing is beneath her when it comes to showing how much she cares,” says Tom.

Myrna hopes to grow support services for men and family members through Wellness Place. She also wants people of all backgrounds and races to feel welcomed at Wellness Place.

- TOGETHER -

Linda and Myrna have both been married for more than 40 years. It may be their fulfilling family life as wife, mother, and grandmother that allows them to open their hearts and care so deeply for people they never met before. Linda Murphy acknowledges the good feeling she gets when people are well served at Wellness Place. She is inspired by participants’ stories and encouraged by the staff, donors, and volunteers who make them possible. Myrna Porter knows those feelings too. She says, “I can pass from this life and know that ‘I have made a difference.’ That is important to me. I also know that my children and grandchildren have watched my husband and me and that they will be, and are, contributors to the world.”