Camp Raising Spirits
An Oncology Nursing Society chapter leadership success story
Laura Fennimore, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, Mary Burgunder, MSN, RN, OCN®, Sandra Lee Schafer, MN, RN, AOCN®, and Gayle S. Jameson, RN, MSN, ACNP-BC, AOCN®

Volunteer leadership is hard work. The pace of the American lifestyle and efforts to balance work, family, and community needs often create competing demands for precious discretionary time. Dedicated oncology nurses care deeply about their profession yet often struggle to find the extra hours or minutes in the day to engage in activities to support their communities. Engagement in local activities with organizations like the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) provides nurses with an opportunity to give back to their communities and connect with the essence of why they became oncology nurses. This article describes how an ONS chapter capitalized on the passion of its members and the engagement of the oncology community through partnership, creativity, and commitment to sustain a weekend camp for adults with cancer for nearly a quarter of a century.

Background
Early diagnosis of cancer and better treatment options have increased the number of cancer survivors in the United States to more than 15.5 million (American Cancer Society, 2016). Activities to promote wellness and support cancer survivorship have been well described in the literature (Grant, Economou, & Ferrell, 2010; Pergolotti et al., 2017; Walker, Szanton, & Wenzel, 2015). The use of an outdoor camping experience to support cancer survivors is primarily described in the literature with examples of camps for children and their families. Camping provides children with chronic illnesses, including cancer, the opportunity to engage in fun activities like any other child with the support of medical and nursing staff and other adults (Martiniuk, Silva, Amylon, & Barr, 2014). “The healing power of play” and acceptance were described by children and their families following a camp for pediatric cancer survivors (Laing & Moules, 2016). A multisite evaluation of 19 summer camps for children with cancer and their siblings measured camper well-being and reported high levels of emotional, physical, social, and self-esteem functioning (Wu, McPhail, Mooney, Martiniuk, & Amylon, 2016).

A camping experience to support adults with a cancer diagnosis is not a new phenomenon. Camp Fresh Horizons was established in 1991 by the Western New York ONS chapter as an innovative well-being program. The first camp held at a Girl Scouts camp provided indoor accommodations and multiple venues for outdoor activities, including a swimming pool, horseshoe pit, boating facilities, and a lake for adventurous campers. Camper outcomes included “healing through shared illness experiences, reduced social isolation, a sense of community . . . and a feeling of being refreshed” (Wallace, Graham, & Wonch, 1993, p. 1372). The current president of the Western New York chapter noted that, although the program
is no longer offered by this chapter, it served as a model for other ONS chapters to adopt successful strategies for their communities (C. Samborkski, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

Camp Raising Spirits (CRS) was established in June 1994 by the Greater Pittsburgh ONS chapter, in consultation with the Western New York ONS chapter, and has been offered annually at the Laurelville Mennonite Camp in Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania. CRS is the longest continuously run camp for adult cancer survivors supported by an ONS chapter. Additional ONS chapters have offered or participated in camp activities for patients with cancer, including Camp Phoenix, established in 1996 (Richmond Area ONS chapter) and Camp Reach for the Stars (a weekend retreat for children with a cancer diagnosis in San Luis Obispo, California), with volunteer support from the Central Shores ONS chapter in San Luis Obispo. Several chapters have participated in Camp Bluebird activities in multiple locations across the country, including the C'est BON (Bayou Oncology Nurses) ONS chapter in Louisiana (S. Holzer, personal communication, March 6, 2017). Camp Bluebird was started in 1985 in Birmingham, Alabama, by a cancer survivor with support from a local hospital foundation (Verner, 2013).

Camp Raising Spirits
Each summer, about 50 campers and their guests are provided with the opportunity to celebrate life and to put the everyday stresses of their diagnosis and treatment on hold for a few days. It is camping, but it is not exactly roughing it. Campers and their caregiver or guest are invited to stay in dorm or hotel rooms and are transported across the beautiful grounds in golf carts driven by intrepid volunteers. Umbrellas are usually needed because the first weekend in June in Western Pennsylvania is often blessed with a 75% chance of rain. Camp activities include a focus on mind–body wellness. Even people with limited mobility can partake in Bingo, arts and crafts, massage and mani­cures, cooking lessons, one-pot gardening, dancing, singing, and evening entertainment that includes magic shows and campfires. A beautiful outdoor labyrinth and quiet walking trails provide opportunities for peaceful, reflective moments. This weekend is about play, fun, the beauty of nature, and new friendships, not only for patients and campers, but also for volunteers.

Sustainability Through Leadership
CRS is a yearlong project that requires many volunteer hours of planning, coordination, and significant fundraising efforts. Project co-chairs provide leadership and direction for a core committee who begins meeting just after camp closes to plan for next year. The core committee focuses on facilities, finance, programming, transportation, marketing, and medical support. The three-day program requires significant support from nearly 60 volunteers from the Greater Pittsburgh ONS chapter and the local oncology community to assist with programs throughout the weekend. Volunteers must be at least 18 years of age, and, after 24 years, several volunteers represent a second generation of CRS helpers.

Camper applications are distributed to multiple oncologists’ offices and radiation treatment centers and via the CRS website (www.campraisingspirits.com). Campers and their guests also must be 18 years of age or older. A small registration fee of $25 per person must be submitted, along with the application that includes a brief medical history form describing the individual’s current or previous cancer treatment plan, other medical conditions, current medications, and special assistance needs for activities of daily living or mobility. An on-site volunteer medical director is available throughout the weekend to review medical histories and provide emergency services and reassurance for campers and their guests.

ONS chapter members have honed their leadership skills through active participation in this volunteer activity. The mechanics of a project of this scope requires key leadership attributes, including partnership, creativity, and commitment.

Partnership
This community project is a quintessential collaborative effort of Greater Pittsburgh ONS chapter members, physician practices, the industry, and the community.

“This weekend is about play, fun, the beauty of nature, and new friendships, not only for patients and campers, but also for volunteers.”
An annual donation request letter targeting local oncology providers, oncology nurses, former campers, and volunteers

Financial support from pharmaceutical representatives

A spring luncheon with a motivational speaker and gift baskets

Raffle ticket sales for a quilt handmade by a chapter member and featuring images from camp

Battle of the Bands, a fun evening of music and local band competition for a good cause

An annual donation from the Greater Pittsburgh ONS chapter ($1,000)

Chapter cookbook sales

Pillows made from previous camp T-shirts

Bracelets with colorful beads recognizing different cancers

Industry partners have been generous in supporting camp activities; however, changes within the pharmaceutical industry during the past decade limited the availability of this source of funding. The core committee worked with an attorney who volunteered his time to establish CRS as a private and public nonprofit entity with a 501(c)(3) status. Donations to CRS are now tax-deductible, and donors are provided with documentation of their donations.

CRS would not be possible without creative volunteers who design arts and crafts activities (e.g., wreaths made from wine corks, sand art candle holders, picture frames, painted birdhouses). Volunteers offer manicures, complete with soothing hand massages. Cooking sessions include tips for healthy eating and fun demonstrations for flaming cheese, bruschetta, delicious scones, and more.

Commitment

Margaret Mead is credited with a famous quote that could have been written about the dedicated volunteers from this oncology community that founded and sustain CRS. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (Lutkehaus, 2008, p. 261). Sustaining a project of this magnitude requires tremendous commitment from volunteer leaders. ONS chapter members and others in this community share a passion for making a difference for cancer survivors. Many friendships have developed with campers who return year after year. A volunteer medical director tells the story of one of her patients who asked her if she was dying. When the doctor said yes, the patient responded that she was disappointed with the timing because she “kinda wanted to go to CRS one more time.”

Conclusion

Camp Raising Spirits is a growth opportunity for ONS members and the people it serves in the community. Quotes like the following keep committed volunteers coming back for more:

- “My favorite activity was a foot massage. I thought I was in heaven.”
- “Just the opportunity to meet people who are going through the same experience and getting away from reality for a while makes all the difference.”
- “I loved seeing ‘my Jim’ have such a good time, pamper himself, and openly discuss his journey, fears, and story about his diagnosis.”

This article may serve as a spark for other ONS chapters to demonstrate leadership by offering a similar community service program.

Laura Fennimore, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, is a professor in the School of Nursing and the Doctor of Nursing Practice Health Systems Executive Leadership Program at the University of Pittsburgh; Mary Burgun, MSN, RN, OCN®, is the senior manager of clinical operations, specialty programs, and education for the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Visiting Nurses Association; and Sandra Lee Schafer, MN, RN, AOCN®, is the director of credentialing at the Hospice and Palliative Credentialing Center, all in Pittsburgh, PA; and Gayle S. Jameson, RN, MSN, ACNP-BC, AOCN®, is a nurse practitioner and associate investigator at the HonorHealth Research Institute in Scottsdale, AZ. Fennimore can be reached at laf36@pitt.edu, with copy to CJONEditor@ons.org.

The authors take full responsibility for this content. During the writing of this article, Fennimore was supported by an End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium grant from City of Hope in Duarte, CA. Jameson has previously received funding from Celgene, Aveo Pharmaceuticals, and Merrimack and has received support from Celgene for services on speakers bureaus.

REFERENCES


