

## Offering comfort to cancer patients

By Mia Taylor  
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BONITA – After six months of chemotherapy and 35 rounds of radiation, Marilyn Arrieta's visit to a Bonita spa was one of the lighter, more pleasant moments she has experienced in the past two years.

“I feel like a woman again, not an experiment,” Arrieta said.

Arrieta, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006, summed up the purpose of the evening at the Leisure Wellness Spa, which hosts cancer retreats for women on the second Monday of each month.

On those evenings, all treatments are free for women who have been diagnosed with cancer. The evening's options include facials, healing touch, Thai massages, hypnosis, manicures and pedicures. Participants also receive skin care products and educational materials about breast cancer, nutrition and wellness.

The spa's owner, Elizabeth Scott, has been hosting the retreats for two years.

She recently applied for a grant from the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation to obtain additional funding for such evenings. Her goal is to include the Filipino and Latino population, two groups that, because of the language barrier, often find dealing with cancer particularly challenging.

“A diagnosed breast cancer patient in a medical facility will experience intimidation, emotional conflict and fear that can overwhelm the most strong and self-sufficient person,” Scott wrote in her grant application.

“Additionally, financial strain, language/cultural barriers and feeling alone will prevent one from doing research, educating themselves or relaxing during the cancer process,” she wrote.

These are realities that Scott knows all too well. She, too, is a cancer survivor.

Scott remembers the precise moment when she knew for certain.

It was Oct. 15, 2002, and she can still see the X-ray technician performing the ultrasound and the lump, as black as coal, appearing on the monitor.

“I said 'Oh, that doesn't look good,' ” Scott said.

Scott said there are two types of cancer patients – recluses and those who tell everyone. Scott fell into the second category – actively reaching out to fight the battle ahead.

Long before she got cancer, Scott was a Chula Vista Parks and Recreation commissioner, a Charter Commissioner and president of the Kiwanis Club of Chula Vista-South County.

She brought that same energy when it came to dealing with her cancer, conducting extensive research on nutrition, wellness and the various treatment options available.



SEAN M. HAFLEY / Union-Tribune  
Amanda Nixon, who was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago, received a facial from massage therapist Michelle Scott at Leisure Wellness Spa in Bonita.



SEAN M. HAFLEY / Union-Tribune  
Josephine Hurov gave cancer survivor Marilyn Arrieta a massage. Arrieta had six months of chemotherapy and 35 rounds of radiation.

### Leisure Wellness Spa cancer retreats

**Where:** 3060 Bonita Road, Suite 201, Bonita

**When:** 4 to 8 p.m., second Monday of each month

**Telephone:** (619) 585-0220

Scott said she also got through that difficult time with the help of her daughter, an aesthetician who gave Scott facials, helping her to feel relaxed. Scott's sister, who is a registered nurse, regularly performed healing touch on Scott. And a friend who is a massage therapist regularly gave Scott massages.

Scott also enrolled in a yoga class, at her daughter's urging.

“That's why I really want to do these cancer retreat nights – to tell women about all that I've learned,” she said.

The journey isn't over for Scott. She was recently diagnosed with cancer again.

Retreats, Scott said, make a difference by creating an appealing reason for breast cancer patients to take time out to do research and self-care.

The Komen foundation has not yet made a decision regarding Scott's grant request, but it has been funding spa retreats like Scott's for years.

Foundation spokeswoman Laura Farmer Sherman said the spa retreats serve an important purpose.

“When you hear that sentence nobody ever wants to hear, that you have breast cancer and you have to undergo surgery and chemotherapy and radiation, really what you're experiencing is your femininity gets taken away literally and figuratively,” she said. “We found that alternative therapies, massage, yoga, all those kinds of things help to rebuild a woman's sense of self and give her a break in the difficulty of what she is facing.”

The Komen foundation started funding research into the effects of such treatments on cancer patients 10 to 15 years ago, Sherman said. What those studies found is that a woman's endorphin levels – the “feel-good” hormones – increase with meditation and massage, she said.

Wayne Bardwell, director of patient and family support services at Moores UCSD Cancer Center, said studies have confirmed the positive effects of alternative treatments.

Bardwell said clinical trials funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health have measured the effect of treatments like massage and found they reduce stress and anxiety and some physical symptoms such as pain.

“And maybe what's as important about . . . treatments is often they help a person feel more relaxed and better about themselves,” Bardwell said. “This can be very beneficial for women living with breast cancer.”

Scott and the other women at the spa during the recent cancer retreat attest to that.

As the women came out of their individual spa treatments or waited to go into one, they gathered in the spa's lounge. Sitting on couches and chairs in their white robes and slippers, they exchanged stories like old friends.

They talked about chemotherapy sessions, about continuing to work while dealing with cancer, about friends who have come and gone, and about hope and faith.

Amanda Nixon, 29, was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. She regularly speaks out about her experience, particularly to high school students.

“I'm adamant about getting the word out,” said Nixon, who is now on the board of a nonprofit organization called Keep A Breast, which raises money for cancer research, education and prevention. She also makes regular trips to Sacramento to lobby on the issue.

“The majority of my activity outside of work revolves around cancer,” Nixon said.

Back in the spa's pedicure room, Arrieta has the laughter continuing.

“I had a wig party. A breast-away party – there is life after breasts,” she told the group.

Soon after she was diagnosed with cancer, Arrieta asked her doctor when she would be considered a “survivor.”

“My doctor said you are a survivor from the moment you are diagnosed,” Arrieta said.

And then she leans in close and adds one last thought: “Hope. If there is one word that is a key, it is hope.”