



Andrea Leonard-Bruno (rear) conducts a workout with Janice Larson. Leonard-Bruno is a personal trainer for cancer survivors. She says that exercise is a critical part of the physical and mental recovery process.

TRIBUNE PHOTO: KYLE GREEN

Trainer keeps patients fit, focused

Andrea Leonard-Bruno prescribes exercise for those battling cancer

By JILL SPITZNASS
The Tribune

Andrea Leonard-Bruno had an early introduction to the ravages of cancer. The 38-year-old was diagnosed with thyroid cancer when she was 18 — somewhere between her mother's two bouts with breast cancer.

"My mom asked if I'd help with her recovery; she was dealing with limited range of motion and nerve damage from the surgery," says Leonard-Bruno, who also was fighting the weight she'd gained after her own surgery. "I did some research into cancer and exercise, and found that there was virtually no information available."

The lack of information — and her desire to help her mother and herself — inspired Leonard-Bruno to become a personal trainer who specializes in working with cancer patients.

"Exercise is a critical and often overlooked component of a cancer patient's recovery," says Leonard-Bruno, who co-wrote "Essential Exercises for Breast Cancer Survivors" in 2000. "It helps people deal with the emotional and physical aspects of having cancer, and the side effects of treatment. Exercise also helps in the recovery process and gives patients the self-confidence to face the world again."

Training the trainers

Shortly after moving from Maryland to Portland in 1993,

Leonard-Bruno established the Breast Cancer Survivors' Foundation, which offered patients grants to work with cancer exercise specialists.

The West Linn resident soon realized that her talents were best administered in a hands-on fashion.

"I made a noble effort for two years, but it wasn't panning out; my strengths aren't in fund raising," says Leonard-Bruno, who now is president of Leading Edge Fitness. "I decided that I could best serve the public by training other trainers to do what I do. That way, we can integrate ourselves within the system and become the next step in the health care continuum."

She sees a clear need for the specialized trainers.

"The medical professionals do their job — they cure cancer. It's the middleman — the person between the doctor and the patient — that doesn't exist in most cases," Leonard-Bruno says. "And unfortunately, there are very few people in the country who are trained to work with cancer patients."

Twice a month, she travels to a different national location to teach a two-day workshop.

"My students are typically experienced personal trainers, and Pilates and yoga instructors," says Leonard-Bruno, who's also written a guide for fitness professionals called "The Cancer Exercise Handbook."

"I teach them to address issues such as neck and back problems, decreased range of motion and lymphedema, a backup of lymphatic fluid as a result of damage to or removal of lymph nodes and lymph vessels."

Building on 'ground zero'

Leonard-Bruno says that it's difficult for healthy people to understand the fallout that cancer and its treatments have on a patient.

"It sounds trivial to us, but many people get to the point where they can't wash their hair, reach into a cabinet or put their bra on. It really affects their quality of life."

Garden Home resident Janice Larson sought Leonard-Bruno's help shortly after her second cancer diagnosis early this year.

"I've always believed in not just depending on medical science for my treatment," says Larson, 49, who's beating cancer this time through two "wonder drugs."

"I believe in approaching the problem in every way — mind, body and spirit. I don't think that addressing only one element will get you where you need to go."

A member of a dragon-boat team made up of breast cancer survivors during last year's Rose Festival, Larson always has been fit. But now, as a cancer patient, its meaning has changed.

"The situation is definitely different when you're having chemo; it takes your body down to ground zero," she says. "I

where you keep yourself healthy and go through the treatment as gracefully as you can. After treatment, you can start building up again."

Accommodating even the most fragile patient is a critical part of the cancer exercise specialist's job.

"Often the exercise just might be easy stretching or very passive yoga or Pilates," says Leonard-Bruno, who meets with clients twice a week, either at their home or in her home gym. "You completely tailor it to where the client is on that given day. But sometimes a client who's undergoing chemotherapy might call and say, 'I'm just not up to it today,' and of course, we'll reschedule our appointment."

The emotional and psychological challenges associated with the disease also must be handled with as much care as the body that houses them.

"I leave no stone unturned in addressing all of a patient's needs," she says. "I also try to keep the doctors in the loop by sending them progress reports about every eight weeks."

Leonard-Bruno has yet to meet a physician who doesn't welcome her work with their patients.

"No one would turn away an exercise program for cancer patients, because everyone knows the benefits of it," she says, a sentiment shared by Dr. Glenn Gero, a New Jersey-based naturopath, cancer exercise specialist and former colleague of Leonard-Bruno's.

"Exercise not only has a mood-elevating effect, but it stimulates appetite, immunity and improves neuromuscular function by strengthening muscle tissue and eliminating toxic wastes," he says. "These effects slow the physical course of the

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