

WAYLAND

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## Quietly, volunteers line up helping hands

By Susan Klein, Globe Correspondent | November 25, 2004

Pam Washek says that when she was undergoing treatment for a cancerous growth in her shoulder, she felt as if angels were fluttering into her house. They were her family and friends, creeping into the kitchen, leaving her dozens of meals she was too ill to cook.

Now she is returning the favor.

Washek, 39, a Wayland mother of three, is one of the founders of Wayland Angels, a group that helps local families in crisis.

The group, now nearly 200 strong, has helped 20 Wayland families, most of them with school-aged children, Washek said. The angels step in to help families in a variety of situations -- when a parent has a life-threatening illness, has undergone surgery, or has a debilitating injury.

Washek, 39, and a friend, Jean Seiden, 46, also of Wayland, both have had cancer. And both recognized that support from kith and kin was crucial to pulling them through their ordeals, both physically and emotionally.

But they wondered what happens to those who may be isolated and not have access to such networks.

"Not everyone has lots of friends and family nearby," Washek said. "You can exhaust family and friends" who are trying to help through a long illness, she said.

In December 2002, the two women sent a message recruiting volunteers to friends and acquaintances and members of Team Jean, a group of about 70 Waylanders who had bicycled in honor of Seiden in a fund-raising ride for cancer research. Nearly 100 people signed on. The number has grown since.

Under Washek's and Seiden's direction, the group provides meals, rides to appointments, leaf raking, and other services. For those with long-term illnesses, a volunteer is assigned to check with the patient daily to see what is needed.

Seiden or Washek usually find out through the grapevine when a family needs help. They contact the person to determine their needs and write up an assignment sheet that specifies where the family lives, why they need help, dietary preferences or restrictions, where meals should be left, or what transportation or errands are needed.

Washek sends out a group e-mail to all the angels, soliciting volunteers, if assignments come in with short notice. If she has more notice, she designs a plan and assigns jobs to specific people.

According to several angels, the requests average out to two or three assignments a year. They may or may not know the family they are helping.

Washek's sister, Joanna Manikas, who lives in Winchester, is developing a website where the angels will be able to see their assignments and people can register directly for help, instead of calling Washek or Seiden.

Washek estimated that she now spends 12 to 15 hours a week administering the program, and she expects the website will make the network more efficient.

The group's goal, Washek said, is to help families carry on as normally as possible.

"When someone gets sick, everything comes to a halt. You want everything to keep going -- to minimize the disruptions on the family," she said.

Among the first to benefit was Elaine, who requested that only her first name be used to protect her family's privacy.

After Elaine's husband was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in January 2003, angels left three meals a week in a cooler in Elaine's garage, and saw her, her husband, and two daughters through five months of tests, chemotherapy, radiation, and

major abdominal surgery.

"Coming home from the hospital, I was so drained. The last thing I could think of was preparing a hot meal," Elaine said. "To have that meal just sitting there was like gold at your front door. People would be hugging you in your driveway when they dropped it off, and you'd never seen them before. . . . You could feel that bolstering around you."

Sisters Kathleen Henderson and Ann Marie Gentilucci, both of Wayland, became reluctant beneficiaries when their father died unexpectedly while they were commuting back and forth from Chicago to tend to another sister dying of ovarian cancer.

Henderson, 44, recalls Seiden dropping by her house uninvited to bring her lunch. "It takes tremendous courage to get involved in someone else's life when things are so bad," she said. "Jean wouldn't take no for an answer."

Henderson was loath to accept the angels' offerings, she said, because she was able-bodied. Then she realized how much the meals helped her grieve and cope.

"You need to have that family time together and to rest," Henderson said. "Everything else around you is so painful. It allows you the time you need to just be. When you're running around and racing around you don't do that."

Dena Ray is a member of the group and a clinical psychologist in private practice in Wayland. She praised the network Washek and Seiden have created.

"There's a structure. The demands are very clear, and it's limited. . . . If you can't fill the request, you don't have to," Ray said. "Instead of isolating people, it's a model for getting help to people and for reaching out for help."

Rosanna Hertz, chairwoman of the women's studies department at Wellesley College, said the use of the Internet, such as the angels' use of e-mail, is enabling people to fill a void created in recent decades by weakened ties among neighbors and extended family members.

With fewer women at home and families' greater mobility, people are less likely to know that a neighbor or acquaintance is in need.

"Many of us don't belong to the old ways where you learned that people needed help," Hertz said.

"This is a great way that people with time available can help and people can get help, without it being a pay-as-you-go relationship, which most of us have our lives reduced to."

The fact that angels often don't know the family they're helping may contribute to its success, Hertz said, noting that it's sometimes easier to provide help when you're not emotionally or socially tied to the beneficiary.

Likewise, people may be more willing to seek help if they know they aren't putting more stress on a neighbor or loved one, and that there's no obligation to reciprocate.

Angels' spouses are also pitching in. One is helping the group incorporate so it can receive tax-deductible donations. Another is helping with computer tasks. He plans to host the group's upcoming website, [www.waylandangels.org](http://www.waylandangels.org), on his company's server. The site is supposed to be up in early January.

Those familiar with Wayland Angels heap praise on Washek and Seiden. But Seiden is quick to deflect it and spread the credit around. "It allows everyone to rise to a higher level. And they all rise," she said. ■