

# LENDING A HAND

**New lesbian cancer project consolidates advocacy, direct service and educational roles in one organization** by Inga Sorensen

Lorie Hansen, 46, loves her two dogs, two cats, her close-knit group of friends, and her job as a kinesiologist at an area Veterans Administration hospital. She's got a Portland Power addiction which she hungrily satisfies via her designation as a season ticketholder, and during those off-Power months, that perennial dyke delight, softball, is way cool with her.

It's a good life, but one which has, of late, been pummeled by pain—mid-March marked one year since Hansen lost her partner of 21-plus years, Sharon Hambleton, to ovarian cancer.

Hambleton died three years after her diagnosis, and just shy of her 55th birthday.

"It was an exhausting three-year battle, but having support, particularly from other lesbians, really helped both Sharon and me," says Hansen, who is spearheading the formation of the Hambleton Project/Portland Lesbian Cancer Network, a fledgling local enterprise designed to provide support, education, advocacy and direct services to lesbians with cancer, as well as their partners and caregivers.

"It was Sharon's vision and hope to see this become a reality," says Hansen, who met Hambleton more than two decades ago when the duo played field hockey and softball together.

"Sharon was an excellent athlete," Hansen boasts tenderly.

Hambleton was also part of a small tight group of lesbian pals known as the Foxy Ladies of '42, because they were all born that year.

Jan Dillon is the partner of Foxy Lady Barb Morris. Dillon and Morris, who live near Carlton, have been together 25 years. Neither have cancer, but both are involved with the Hambleton Project—and not only because of their love for Hambleton and Hansen.

"We've experienced that feeling of camaraderie among lesbians, but there may be other women who don't have that kind of support network established," explains Dillon, a retired science teacher and chair of the project's education committee.

Toss a life-threatening illness like cancer into the mix and support becomes that much more vital.

"Having other lesbians who understand what you're going through is really important," Dillon says.

Another Foxy Lady, who asked to remain anonymous, couldn't agree more.

The 55-year-old lesbian was diagnosed with breast cancer a year after Hambleton received her ovarian cancer diagnosis.

"I immediately turned to Sharon," she says. "I had other supportive friends, but Sharon was the shining star... I could talk with her about all facets of my life. I didn't have to edit things out."

Dealing with cancer is tough enough without having the additional stress of censoring yourself around heterosexuals. That, she says, can scarf up much-needed energy.

"Sharon had such energy and such a positive attitude. Up until the day she died, she thought

she was going to beat the cancer," says the woman, who is honoring Hambleton's legacy by serving on the project's board. "Sharon provided such an example of strength and courage."

The Hambleton Project plans, in part: to provide a guide on how to create and maintain a personal support group; to generate a referral list of medical specialists, therapists, attorneys and clergy in the area who are sensitive to lesbian issues; to provide referrals to support groups for lesbians with cancer and groups for their partners; to network with health care agencies and the lesbian community; and to serve as a contact for out-of-town patients coming to the Portland area to receive cancer treatment.

While seeking treatment on the East Coast, Hansen says, Hambleton received emotional



Lorie Hansen

and practical support from lesbians associated with the Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, a well-established program based in the nation's capital.

"Sharon didn't know these women, yet they took her in when she was there," Hansen says. "It meant so much. We want to be able to do the same for lesbians coming to Portland for treatment."

The Hambleton Project is a member of the National Coalition of Feminist and Lesbian Cancer Projects, which is involved in a variety of programs that provide services to women around health issues. Some are advocacy-only organizations, while others provide direct services to women with cancer and their families. Still others provide referrals only.

According to Hansen, the Hambleton Project will provide all of the above.

While support groups exist locally for lesbians with cancer and their partners, the Hambleton Project is believed to be the only program in the greater Portland area with such a broad agenda.

Dr. Jocelyn White is a Portland physician and former president of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, a national organization for sexual minority physicians and health care providers. White has been acting as an informal advisor to the Hambleton Project.

"Lesbian cancer projects around the country have been well-received and I'm very excited about the prospects for one here," she says, adding, "This is a project whose time has come."

■ The first general meeting for the HAMBLETON PROJECT is slated for 7 pm Monday, April 6, at Friendly House, 1737 NW 26th Ave. in Portland. Those interested in learning more or volunteering are encouraged to attend. For further details, call 642-1007. The project's mailing address is PO Box 7102, Aloha, OR 97007-7102.

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