A Pandemic Can’t Stop PPMC’s CAREs Superstars

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has underscored that volunteering in vulnerable communities is more important than ever, but it has also made it more challenging, and not just because of the practicalities of physical distancing and safety. Giving back can easily get lost in the shuffle as everyone tries to navigate this new normal while balancing changing personal and professional responsibilities with ever-changing news and concerns.

Providing Cancer Patients with Creative Coping Tools

Penn Medicine has taken careful steps to ensure its facilities are safe for patients who need in-person medical care. Even so, for cancer patients receiving chemotherapy, their concerns about spending another long day in the hospital amid a pandemic can make the process even tougher. In an effort to ease their anxiety and offer a welcome distraction, Amy Schwartz, MHA, director of PPMC’s Cancer Service Line, developed a proposal to create a therapeutic arts initiative for infusion patients.

Research has shown that relaxing art activities — drawing, coloring, crafting, journaling, and even assembling puzzles — can have a significant positive impact on cancer patients’ mental health, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression and boosting their mood while they undergo treatment. Furthermore, creative expression can also help them work through difficult emotions associated with their diagnosis. Schwartz sent out a preliminary survey to measure patients’ interest in this type of programming, and the response was overwhelmingly favorable. The initiative is due to roll out later this year, and Schwartz intends to continue monitoring patients’ interest with the aim of implementing a long-term program.

“It’s more important than ever to be able to provide a bit of extra support and offer something that can take patient’s minds off things,” Schwartz said. “While the pandemic has thrown a bit of a wrench in our plans, I’m excited to get creative with how we can best use the CAREs grant funding, and I’m confident that we will see our patient satisfaction scores improve.”

Preparing Children for the School Year and Beyond

Debra Mosley, RN, a nurse on Cupp 4 South, is committed to providing underserved children with the opportunities they need to grow into healthy, strong, and motivated individuals — so much so that she recently received her third CAREs grant supporting her work.

Mosley teaches dance classes for more than 30 local children, teens, and adults at the Feet of Faith Dance Company, a non-profit that she founded in West Philadelphia in 2016. The fall season will begin in mid-September, and while she has readied her studio for social distancing, it’s not just masks that her pupils will need. To ensure no child is left out because COVID-19 has spread their families thin financially, she plans to use half of her funding to cover tuition costs so any student who wants to express themselves, practice teamwork, and build self-esteem can do so. Because the school year has also started, she decided to use the other half of the grant to organize a backpack and supply giveaway.

“Many parents really struggle to afford things that a lot of us take for granted,” Mosley said, noting that she empathizes with kids who wish for shiny new school supplies or access to the arts, but are left out because they’re typically too expensive. “Many schools are staying remote right now, but as they move to in-person learning later in the year, it’ll be really important for these children to be set up for success with access to all of the resources they need.” After all, navigating this new world of hybrid education will be challenging enough without students being left unprepared.

Sharing Smiles Wherever They’re Needed Most

Sometimes, all someone needs to carry them through a difficult day is a smile from a stranger. That’s something Kara Lemanowicz lived by, and after her unexpected passing at only 14 years old, it has become a mission for her family as they sought to find a way to celebrate her memory. Since 2016, Paige Powick, a medical assistant and Kara’s cousin, has been involved in Smiles from Kara (SFK), a non-profit that pledges to provide help wherever it is most needed.

Though SFK initially focused on providing opportunities for underprivileged children and children with disabilities to participate in sports, enjoy extracurricular activities, and pursue higher education, it has grown in scope. For example, Powick’s CAREs grant will partially cover the medical bills for a 23-year-old who was recently diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. In 2020 alone, SFK has dispersed funds to more than two dozen local and national organizations, GoFundMe accounts, and individuals struggling with food and housing insecurity — all amid a pandemic that has thrown many into an unexpected financial crisis. Every year, the foundation also hosts a 5K run/walk on Kara’s birthday (including a virtual event this year), and the proceeds are funneled into scholarships for graduating seniors at Kara’s high school.

“In dark times, and especially during a pandemic, it’s important to spread light. Kara knew that even at 14, so our goal is to keep the positivity going,” Powick said. “It doesn’t take anything to be kind. Whether you offer financial support to a family who really needs help or give a compliment to someone who needs encouragement, anyone can make a difference.”

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For the morning’s patients. They showed the observation unit into a COVID-19 circuit, and cylinder is ready for the team’s subspecialty. When they blew me away. They jumped into something they didn’t fully understand as a leader is to motivate my people. But they blew me away. They jumped into something they didn’t fully understand without question, and every day, they continue to join the fight and fight hard with our physical and mental health. The team responded with resilience and renewed drive. Offering them unwavering support and irreplaceable guidance through the pandemic has been a privilege, and I am deeply grateful for their candid, insightful remarks. I encourage you to watch the recordings on the PPMC Intranet if you missed these conversations.

In the first session, our thoughtful panelists discussed their personal experiences and opportunities to make significant change. Through an interactive poll, audience members also indicated how they are feeling, with themes of anxiety, frustration, and sadness running through it, but also motivation. It is my hope that we can harness this motivation and continue engaging in these focused dialogues long after the headlines change.

VantagePoint
Michele Volpe, Chief Executive Officer

This summer, Penn Presbyterian Medical Center hosted a series of virtual town halls focused on addressing systemic racism and cultivating a culture of diversity, inclusion, and equality within our walls and in our community. It was such a privilege to hear the perspectives of our panelists and speakers, and I am deeply grateful for their candor, insightful remarks. I encourage you to watch the recordings on the PPMC Intranet if you missed these conversations.

After all, this first round of discussion was the tip of the iceberg, as evidenced by our second session, which explored health disparities. Each speaker did an excellent job illustrating how factors like housing, food, and financial insecurities, lack of access to transportation, and poor insurance coverage severely impact health and access to care for our most vulnerable patients. Especially as COVID-19 continues to highlight and exacerbate disparities that disproportionately affect Black and minority communities, we must continue to promote and protect the physical and mental health of our neighbors through community engagement, patient education, advocacy, and research.

Though our final town hall took place a few weeks ago, I want to assure you that it was not the last conversation we will be engaging in. Our team has received so many excellent suggestions about how we can be more present in our community, develop a formalized mentorship program to set our staff up for success, and improve communication and accountability through defined goals and metrics. And this is only the beginning. As Clubhouse Childs, MD, MS, powerfully noted during our first panel, the work of diversity, inclusion, and equality is a marathon; it will not finish in a month or a year, and we must be prepared to keep making strides, even when conversations get tough. At the same time, as Dr. Childs also said, this work is also a team sport; everyone from every level and every team must play their part in order for us to be successful.

I am proud to be embarking on this long overdue, but vital journey with incredible colleagues at my side. I encourage you to continue reaching out to me and to other leaders to share your thoughts and concerns. By learning from each other, challenging each other, and respecting each other, we can — and will — make our hospital, our organization, our community, and our nation better.