



Contributor

Teaching Kitchen Would Help Nourish Cancer Patients for the Fight of Their Lives

Pay it forward for cancer patients like Janet with your contribution to a teaching kitchen at Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute. Just return the enclosed giving envelope or donate online.

On her first day of chemotherapy at Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute, Janet Hansen plucked a piece of a jade plant from the infusion suite atrium. She dubbed it her “cancer plant” and hoped they would survive together.

Janet was 55 when she developed a sore throat that turned into a lump that proved to be cancer, the beginning of seven years of treatment that included three surgeries, radiation, chemotherapy, and immunotherapy.

“If you have a place right there to get your information from, it could save your life.”

Janet Hansen, cancer survivor

“When you go into the cancer institute, it’s a wonderful place to be. It’s your world when you have cancer, and everyone is there to help you,” she said. “They are there to help you, but I thought about what I could do to help myself, and that was work on my attitude, my sense of humor, and my diet. My body had to be strong enough to survive the radiation and the chemotherapy.”

For patients like Janet, who struggled to stay nourished during her treatment, Benefis aims to work with donors to add a teaching kitchen during a “re-visioning” remodel of the cancer institute.

The project also will involve increasing the size of the infusion suite and pharmacy and expanding the genetic counseling program.

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Janet rapidly dropped weight as she struggled to swallow and battled fatigue, radiation burns, lost teeth, and food texture issues during her treatment. Her throat still swells until she has an opening only the width of a pencil. She must twist her head to swallow, and choking is a constant risk. Every bite counts when you can take so few, and she has had to comb through magazines and Internet guides for nutrition advice.

With advanced cancer like Janet's, appetite loss and fatigue are major factors, said Amanda Lucas, an SCI nurse practitioner specializing in palliative care. Taste buds change, too, and patients often are frustrated because nothing tastes good.



Too much weight loss during cancer treatment can seriously impact quality of life, particularly by causing worse levels of fatigue.

The plan for the teaching kitchen includes using the space for classes with trained dietitians and chefs to provide patients with tips so they can better tolerate treatments and reduce complications. They'll have strategies on how to incorporate different flavors, textures, and nutrients into patients' diets, while also giving input into how to wash and prepare food differently to adapt to being immunocompromised as a result of aggressive treatments.

Nearly 80% of cancer patients experience malnutrition at some point during their course of treatment.

The teaching kitchen also would offer a place where people walking the same challenging paths have camaraderie as they work on staying nourished, Janet said.

"It's good to put your heads together and get new ideas," she said. "Having a teaching kitchen at SCI would have been helpful. I spent a lot of time by myself, experimenting, and not knowing what to do."

Janet learned from another patient about a vegetable juice recipe that helps her feel better. She took speech therapy, which helped her develop different muscles to help with swallowing.

"When you're sick with cancer, people think it's like being sick with a cold, but there's not a word in the human language that can explain how sick you really are," Janet said.

"That last chemotherapy was a real hard one on me, and your body's got to survive that stuff," she added. "If you have a place right there to get your information from, it could save your life."

Cancer taught Janet about nutrition, and it also taught her about life. She learned who would stick with her in hard times and about the strength within herself. It brought her family closer together.

As for her "cancer plant," Janet overwatered the succulent and watched it wilt. She, too, had her "oh no" moments when her future was in doubt. Now the plant is doing well and has a stem as wide as her wrist, and she's been cleared of cancer.

"Sitting here cancer-free is something I never thought would happen," she said. "SCI has become to me a safe haven. **It's where hope of survival is.** It's like a family. No one understands what you're going through unless you have cancer or work with cancer patients. At Sletten, everybody gets it. **It's a great feeling to know that when you go there, you're in a safe place, and they'll have what you need to help you get better.**"

“ My body had to be strong enough to survive the radiation and the chemotherapy. ”

Janet Hansen, cancer survivor



Together, We Light the Path for Cancer Patients

At Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute, we believe no one should ever have to walk alone in darkness on their cancer journey.

A caring staff, compassionate physicians, support groups, a warm community of donors and survivors, and a welcoming atmosphere are all part of easing the experience for our friends and neighbors across the region after their cancer diagnosis.

Donor support built SCI in 2005 to provide the best in comprehensive cancer care for the people of northcentral Montana. We came together to light the way, providing hope, comfort, and state-of-the-art healing.

Patients have always led the way in shaping SCI to meet their needs, and that continues as we “re-vision” making the most of this special place to support the needs of patients into the future.

To that end, we are engaging in a two-year project with **three major goals**: expand the infusion suite where patients receive chemotherapy and increase the size of the pharmacy to accommodate the increased demand for customized infusions; expand the genetic counseling program for early detection; and establish a teaching kitchen to help cancer patients learn how to stay nourished during treatment.

Cancer patients have a rare blessing in having so many services together in one place, but it's vital for coordinated care and better outcomes, not to mention easier for patients. We hope you will join us in making this project possible.



Your gifts toward improvements at the Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute will help cancer patients cope.

Meet Our New Benefis Foundation Interim Chief Operating Officer

I am humbled and excited as I step into leadership at Benefis Foundation, and I look forward to the opportunities we have to improve healthcare for the people of northcentral Montana through philanthropy.

I'm grateful to Marilyn Parker, our outgoing COO, for all she accomplished in her 22 years with the Foundation, and for the warmth and support from our outstanding staff here.

I began working in nonprofits with Special Olympics Montana and have been with Benefis Foundation since 2018. It's been a privilege to learn from board members, staff members, donors, and recipients.

I hope we can continue to grow our two major annual events, Mayfaire and our Impact employee giving campaign. We build on a wonderful legacy of giving.

Another priority is working closely with hospital departments to find ways to support their missions.

Every day, Benefis Foundation donors like you help patients and their families through challenging times. I look forward to getting to know you better, building trust, and deepening our relationship as we work to fulfill your goals.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jami Wald".

Jami Wald,
Interim Chief Operating Officer,
Benefis Foundation





Benefis NICU 50th Anniversary Celebrates the ‘Tiny but Mighty’

Melody Martinsen of Choteau remembers her terror when her son arrived six weeks too soon, weighing only 4 pounds, 9 ounces and gravely ill. Before he was even an hour old, Madison had crashed three times.

Amid the memories of that first awful night are the sight of her tiny son breathing with the help of a ventilator and Dr. Ronald Coen and Marlene Lund, RN, watching over him. Melody wept.

“They told us that if Madison began to die, they would come and get us so we could hold him, and, through the night, every time the heavy outer NICU door opened, our hearts stopped,” she said. “I think Dr. Coen worked with angels at his side, and it did take a miracle for Madison to live. We thank him for our son’s life.”

Melody and her husband, Jeff, watched the NICU staff care for Madison through a heart-valve problem, underdeveloped lungs, and a virus.

“There just aren’t words to express how amazingly grateful we were to all of those compassionate, professional, beautiful nurses who cared for Madison at his most vulnerable,” she said.

On Sept. 22, 1996, Madison came home. Today, he is an electrical engineer who recently graduated from Montana State University in Bozeman and lives in Lewistown.

Stories like Madison’s were the heart of the NICU’s 50th anniversary reunion in June, which brought back together providers, staff, retirees, NICU families, and NICU graduates – those “tiniest but mightiest of fighters.”





The oldest NICU graduate at the gathering was born at 27 weeks in 1990. Dina Waldner of Fairhaven Hutterite Colony was flown to Salt Lake City for surfactant just days before the lung treatment became available here.

Dina said her sister was not excited about meeting the new preemie in the family.

"Why did you pick her?" she asked her mom. "She is not cute."

"I have come a long ways since then," Dina said.

The NICU reunion is a reminder that the work and heartache that comes with the job is worth it in the end, Marlene said.

Marlene attended with her grandson, Cole, who arrived at 30 weeks after kicking a hole in his mom's uterine wall. He spent 35 days in the NICU and began at 2 pounds, 4 ounces. He's 10 now.

"I say thank you to the nurses who took care of him," Marlene said. "They did an amazing job. It was hard to be on the other side of the bed."

Robyn Brantner brought her daughter, Oaqlynn, to the reunion. She is just 18 months old and had a rocky beginning, arriving at less than 2 pounds and dropping below 1 pound as she struggled to eat (and breathe and digest). Oaqlynn spent 119 days in the NICU.

"The NICU nurses are angels," Robyn said. "They are the reason I have her. Anywhere else, she would not have lasted. They do their jobs with love and passion, and they're the reason she walks and talks. They're the reason all the kids are here, and everyone should see the miracles they have performed."

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In 1972, the Deaconess Hospital Medical Center established the six-bed NICU and an air transport system to fly critically ill newborns and their mothers to the hospital through an arrangement with the military.

Marlene also was part of the NICU flight team. She remembered babies in isolettes balanced on a helicopter seat and a trash can, and a country landing strip lit by pickup headlights.

“We brought babies in on a prayer and a promise,” she said. “If they hadn’t come, they wouldn’t have survived.”

The NICU was the first in Montana and the first in the state to have a neonatologist or a neonatal nurse practitioner.



In 2009, a NICU in the new South Tower represented a departure from the outdated model of a single room with a bay of bassinets, with beeping, buzzing, and other noises that were hard on the tiny babies. The South Tower debuted with 17 private rooms with bassinets and daybeds for parents, helping encourage the family’s involvement in growing and bonding with the baby.

In 1968, when neonatal intensive care was developing as a field, babies who weighed 3-4 pounds at birth had a 25% chance of survival. Now it’s more than 95%, and the highly specialized care also helps prevent irreversible damage.

For 50 years, the Benefis NICU has been the difference for hundreds of babies. Providers, nurses, and others on staff, donors, and advocates have been with families through life, loss, and itty-bitty victories.



How Donors Support NICU Families

NICU Fund: Supports enhancements to the NICU such as bili lights for jaundice treatment and NICview cameras to give parents/grandparents peace of mind when they can’t be at the bedside.

Angel Fund: Provides financial assistance for parents who travel for a baby’s treatment.

Gift of Life Housing: Provides a free place to stay for parents who travel to Great Falls to care for a baby in the NICU.

Mercy Flight: Transports expectant mothers and babies to treatment with a specialized flight team.



Mayfaire Donors Forge New Paths in Cancer Treatment With Record Contributions

As gala goes honored loved ones affected by cancer by setting a light for them in trees at Mayfaire, the reach of the disease was clear.

Those lights shone the way for attendees at the 23rd annual Mayfaire, Benefis Foundation’s signature fundraising event. **Mayfaire 2022 raised a record-shattering \$1,080,000.**

The event included a golf tournament at Meadow Lark Country Club and a gala at the Mansfield Center. The Mayfaire golf tournament drew a field of 66 teams, and the First Interstate Bank team took home the Mayfaire Cup.

In 2000, the inaugural Mayfaire raised \$15,000 for Gift of Life, which provides a free place for people to stay while undergoing cancer treatment or while caring for a baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. In the last decade, the event has raised \$290,000 in 2015 up to \$650,000 in 2019 for Benefis Women’s and Children’s Center.

The Sletten family, namesakes of the institute, and Sletten Co. employees, who built the institute, rightly take pride in it. They started the Mayfaire paddle raise with a splash, pledging \$300,000 collectively.

With this one event, Mayfaire donors made a significant – astonishing even – dent in the \$3 million the Foundation aims to raise for the SCI project.

We are so grateful for the generosity of our sponsors and donors who supported Mayfaire this year!



Camp Francis Helps Families After Devastating Losses

Across the circle at her first Camp Francis, Kathy Van Tighem watched tears stream down the face of a 6-year-old camper.

“She was full of emotion, and she had been holding it in for so long,” Kathy said. “She had gone through a trying loss, and this was a ceremony to name the person she lost.”

The girl returned to camp year after year, later becoming a teen volunteer and now an adult volunteer.

Every year, Benefis Peace Hospice’s beloved Camp Francis provides a sanctuary for children who have lost a loved one. The Children’s Bereavement Program continues the camp magic all year for children and teens.

“As soon as I experienced camp, I knew it was something unique, something purposeful,” Kathy said. “Every ceremony, every craft, every conversation, and every presentation was powerful and aimed to walk with kids through their grief and allow them the opportunity to experience it and to learn from it.”

Kathy began attending camp as a volunteer when she learned about Hospice during her grandfather’s final days, and she’s now camp director. She and her father, Dave, were honored at this year’s camp for 20 years of service. Her mother, Patty, also is a Children’s Bereavement volunteer, and her niece, Marissa, is the camp nurse.

“Camp started as a great idea to provide a place for kids to heal, but it’s grown into a place where families can grow and come together,” Kathy said. “By teaching the kids how to grieve, they set the stage for the adults in their lives to know it’s OK to grieve and to transform that gut-wrenching pain into celebrating good memories of their loved one.”

Campers’ families are trying to keep their families afloat after their loss and may suppress their grief amid their to-do lists and desire to “protect” their children from their own pain.

“Likewise, we have kids who say, ‘I don’t want Mom to worry about me because she has so much to deal with since Dad died.’ They’re protective of us as we are of them,” Kathy said. “Learning how to be sad and supportive together is one of the best things families can walk away knowing.”

The support of donors means volunteers can focus is on the life-changing work of camp instead of fundraising, Kathy said. “I wish every donor could experience camp. We are so thankful for the people who make camp possible.”



Your gifts will make a child’s grief easier to bear.

Your support for the Children’s Bereavement Program at Benefis Peace Hospice helps children cope all year.

Please accept my Children’s Bereavement Program gift:

- in the enclosed giving envelope.
- as an online donation given today at Benefis.org/Give or by scanning the code.

