Four years after its inception, the multidisciplinary breast cancer program at Clarian North Medical Center in Carmel, IN, has treated more than 650 survivors and has been expanded to include lymphedema care; bras, prosthesis and wigs; social work; family and individual counseling; complementary medicine; and survivorship.

The staff travels with the patients on their cancer journey, understanding that we are not just here for them, but extraordinarily committed. They put their lives in our hands. Although that may sound dramatic, it is true and explains the deep bond we have with each other. We stand in awe of them while reaching out to provide support. They have faced cancer and their own mortality and many are left with the lingering aftereffects of the strong treatments they were given. Some are young with hovering families that make them seem to almost glow with youth and hope for the future. Others are on their own in the world, creating their own support systems, standing tall even when they feel like curling up in a ball on the floor.

I felt it was time to hold an event to celebrate our survivors. I wanted all the usual things, a party and community partnerships, but something special too—something amazing and something that made a statement. I wanted to create a moment of unity for all of the survivors, not entertainment, but empowerment.

A month before the mid-December event, I was listening to an interview with Bill Wasik, a performance artist who is credited with inventing the flash mob. In a flash mob, a group of people have a secret plan and they execute it in public together in a way that seems spontaneous to the unsuspecting bystanders. Different types of flash mobs exist, such as freeze (all the people suddenly freeze in position and stay there), dance (people start dancing in a choreographed way as if in a musical), and pillow fight (well, pillow fighting).

I talked with our oncology social worker, Jill Dodson, LSW, LMHC, LMFT, about flash mobs. She had seen one where more than 20,000 people danced to music by the Black Eyed Peas. We shared a sense of awe at what it might have been like to be one of the dancers, planning and practicing for those few moments of moving in unison, creating a great dawning

Photo courtesy of Clarian North Medical Center. Used with permission.

Christy Dunn and her daughter Karli, at left, share memories with Angela Dearman and her daughter Jayla during the survivor celebration at Clarian North Medical Center in Carmel, IN. Christy and Angela were both pregnant when they were diagnosed with breast cancer and treated at Clarian’s multidisciplinary breast cancer program.
realization of the number of people in on the surprise, and generating a thrill of excitement and unity as more and more people joined the dance. We discussed the idea of doing a flash mob dance with survivors and caregivers at our event, but with the event less than a month away, the obstacles seemed overwhelming. No one on our team had any dance background and we could not imagine choreographing and teaching a dance. The planned party space was the five-story atrium in the center of our hospital. Many questions arose, such as how would we get the word out in a timely fashion and would our survivors and caregivers even want to dance in public? I half dismissed the idea as too difficult, but then I discussed it with a breast cancer survivor, Barb, at the coffee bar later that day. She started dancing right there at the coffee bar, in the atrium, in front of everyone. She said survivors would definitely dance and we should do it. Her enthusiasm launched the idea. A little investigation revealed that one of the plastic surgeons in our program had a medical assistant who was a professional dancer. We worked together and she choreographed a dance to the Gloria Gainer disco classic, “I Will Survive.” She had considered the physical reserves of the dancers, the view from above, and the limited dancing space—it was perfect.

I booked practice times before the event and recruited staff to help call survivors and invite them to dance. As Barb predicted, many of the survivors were enthusiastic about participating and others couldn’t wait to watch it. With three days’ notice, during the holiday season no less, 22 survivors, some still in treatment, came to learn the dance at the first practice. We videotaped the practice and posted it online so others could practice. Nineteen additional survivors came to the second session. The practices were such an unexpected source of fun and camaraderie that we are exploring the development of a dance exercise intervention with our survivors. The party was in full swing at the designated time for the dance. It was wonderful to see people with hair growing in, color coming back, looking whole. It was inspiring to see survivors with similar stories connect and support each other. It also was heart-breaking to hear about new recurrences. One young woman had just learned that day that she had metastatic disease, but she had come to dance anyway.

Our plan for the event was to start the music exactly 45 minutes into the party and then follow the typical flash mob format: burst into dance a few people at a time until we had a large group dancing, and then end the dance acting as if nothing had happened. The music started and I jumped in at my part. The dance seemed to go on and on, bouncing to the disco beat, buoyed up by these beautiful women all around me. At the end, applause broke out and, despite flash mob protocol, survivors and caregivers hugged and cried. It was a lovely, moving, and inspiring highlight to our survivor celebration.

It is clear that we are not a group of professional dancers or even fit hipsters, but the magic of the flash mob still resonates. You can see the group dancing as one organism, hands swaying together in affirmation of survival, and finally you can see the joy and hugs at the end. From an expression of exhilaration at being alive and able to dance, to a message of hope for the newly diagnosed, to an “in your face” feeling of beating back the cancer beast, the dance meant different things to different survivors. But whatever meaning they took from it, survivors, caregivers, and guests at the dance were unanimously enthusiastic about the positive powers of the breast cancer survivor flash mob dance.

To view a video of the Clarian North Medical Center flash mob dance, visit www.youtube.com/clariannorth.

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