

Life & Arts

Section E • The Columbus Dispatch • Thursday, Jan. 9, 2014



COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Oncology aesthetician Joan Flower massages the skin of Marla Nawrocki, who has leukemia.

A soothing touch

Aesthetician schooled to ease skin problems associated with cancer

By Allison Ward
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A gift certificate to a traditional spa warmed the heart of Jodi Dayan, but the Dublin mother of two — who was undergoing chemotherapy — struggled to find a service she considered safe.

"I was making sure I got a treatment that wouldn't affect my face," said Dayan, who regularly enjoyed facials until her treatment for breast cancer created skin problems.

She settled on a scalp massage.

Afterward, though, a thoughtful friend discovered Simply Skin, a spa owned and operated by Joan Flower, the only certified oncology aesthetician in central Ohio.

Three others serve clients elsewhere in the state: in Cincinnati; Toledo; and



Amelia, in Clermont County.

The facials that Flower provides put the 44-year-old early-intervention specialist at ease despite all that she — and her skin — had endured.

"It was gentle, and she didn't do any extractions," Dayan said. "She does a lot of cleansing. It was so relaxing, like

Flower sees Nawrocki once a month for a facial at her Simply Skin spa on the Northwest Side.

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"It's a time when I can come and just be loved."

— Marla Nawrocki, client

having a back massage on your face."

A relatively new field of skin care, oncology aesthetics caters to cancer patients — who, depending on the type of cancer and the treatment course, suffer from various skin problems.

Rashes, dryness, redness, itching, inflammation and sensitivity have all been documented, as have issues such as hair loss and nail changes, said Dr. Shannon Trotter, who specializes in dermatological oncology at the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital.

"I appreciate there's additional education to really understand the unique skin issues of cancer patients," said Trotter, referring to those trained in oncology aesthetics.

"It's a good complement to the medical side for cancer patients."

Flower, who became certified in 2012, opened a business eight months ago on the Northwest Side.

In addition to many healthy clients, she serves about eight women with cancer.

"When I treat healthy skin, my goal is to work on sun damage, hyperpigmentation, wrinkles," said Flower, 55. "In oncology aesthetics, I'm working on rehydration, calming and soothing."

For a client with cancer, she doesn't administer peels or heavy exfoliations, she said.

She does revive definition in the face, perform massages and recommend products that don't irritate damaged skin.

She also teaches women who have experienced hair loss how to draw eyebrows or achieve the look of eyelashes.

"It's a safe place," Flower said — "the touch I am using, the products."

Two-pronged therapy

In a basement suite at a women's health-care building on Olentangy River Road, Marla Nawrocki undressed, covered up with a blanket and lay on the heated bed, with soothing music playing in the background.

All-week, the Olde Towne East resident had been looking forward to her monthly facial appointment.

"Your skin is dehydrated today," Flower said as she began to

massage lotions and oils onto the face and limbs of the leukemia patient.

"We'll do a light, light exfoliation."

"Did you see where the swelling went down on my neck?" Nawrocki asked.

During a free moment, Flower — who has worked with Nawrocki since before the shop opened — jotted down the health improvements on a chart.

Each new client with cancer completes a six-page form documenting any surgeries, medications, skin issues and chemo-port use.

Although she has opted not to use chemotherapy or radiation to treat her disease, Nawrocki still has skin challenges — especially lymphedema, or swelling because of a compromised lymphatic system.

Flower massages some of the swelling on a limited basis but refers such patients to a lymphatic specialist when needed.

Sometimes, she denies requests for certain facial treatments, such as deep exfoliations or heat-based procedures, because of safety concerns.

"She knows what's best," Nawrocki said. "My skin has gotten better . . . because I use good products and I use good services."

Beyond the physical help she has received from the aesthetician, Nawrocki values the emotional support even more.

"It's a time when I can come and just be loved," she said. "It makes me feel pretty; it makes me feel like a woman."

Renewing spirits and building confidence, Flower said, represent vital parts of her job.

"Your skin is part of who you are," she said. "You look at that person every day in the mirror, and it's hard when that person doesn't look like who you're used to seeing."

Broad training

After raising three daughters, Flower, at age 52, went back to school in 2011.

She had been employed by IBM for 10 years before having children and, upon becoming an empty

nester, wanted to help other people.

She attended a 750-hour program — a nine-month effort — at the Spa School in the Clintonville neighborhood to become a licensed managing aesthetician, then took four days of training through the Canada-based Touch for Cancer, the leading oncology-aesthetics certification program in the world.

Morag Currin, at work in a skin-care laboratory at the time, founded Touch for Cancer in 2008 because aestheticians had frequently asked her about products and services for cancer patients.

Students are schooled in oncologic terminology as well as safe products and potential risks, said Currin, who urges aestheticians to adapt appointments to the needs of each client.

Students treat cancer patients and, to become certified, are required to receive a 100 percent score on a four-hour exam.

Touch for Cancer, Currin said, also partners with outside sources to offer additional training on make-up application and oncologic massage therapy — as undergone by Flower, who plans to take a course in aromatherapy, too.

Skin issues in cancer patients, said Trotter of the James, need to be addressed because they have a strong psychosocial effect ("People can see it," she said) and because they cause interruptions — or even a discontinuation — of cancer treatments.

"They can be very itchy or painful, and a patient can't sleep," Trotter said. "They're not getting enough sleep, and that can have a trickle-down effect."

Although she cautions patients to ask their physicians before seeing an outside provider, she seeks services such as those provided by an oncology aesthetician.

Flower approaches spa treatments in a more clinical way than do her traditional counterparts, and she doesn't hesitate to send clients to the doctor's office or consult physicians.

In fact, her business has a motto of sorts: "Completing the circle of care."

"Touch is that bridge between your physical self and your spiritual self," she said. "That connection does so much for your healing." award@dispatch.com