

To Honor a Sister and Support Life with Cancer[®]



Char Vavrina

In early 1999, Sharon Nicolaisen was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her sister, Char Vavrina, was by her side from the moment of her diagnosis to the moment of her death six years later. From the time Sharon was born, she and Char shared everything: clothes, a bedroom, their dreams and secrets...and when Sharon faced cancer, Char shared that battle with her, as well. "Sharon's war with cancer has directed the remainder of my life," she said. As a testament to her sister's fight, Char chose to support Inova Health System's Life with Cancer[®] Program. Life with Cancer is part of Inova Cancer Services and with a variety of programs and resources, it provides information, education and support free of charge, to cancer patients and their loved ones, no matter where they live or where they are treated.

As her caregiver, Char wrote down questions before Sharon's doctor's appointments, accompanied her to each one, and discussed what they had learned afterwards. She was by Sharon's side through days and nights of pain and fear. But Char also relentlessly tracked down information to solve problems caused by the treatment's side effects, such as non-chemical creams to soothe itchy dry skin without interfering with chemotherapy.

Char saw that for Sharon — as for many people battling cancer — whether she had a "good day" or a "bad day" depended in large part on how she looked to herself in the mirror. On bad days, Sharon often refused to leave the house even if she had the energy to do so. "Sharon wanted so badly to appear normal, for her children's sake, as well as her own," Char said. "She refused to be defined by cancer."

Char credits Life with Cancer (LWC) with helping her navigate these issues on her sister's behalf. "I could not have found my way through the last year of Sharon's life without Life with Cancer." However, the Family Center did not have a functional, dedicated space designed to help people address the appearance related changes that happen during cancer treatment. This can be a devastating and frightening time that impacts not only appearance but also self esteem.

With Char's help and determination, the Sharon Nicolaisen Appearance Center at LWC was born. Char's commitment to the Appearance Center is an extension of her commitment to her sister. "I don't think of myself as a philanthropist," Char said. "I am just a person who saw a need and made a choice."

