

Our Neighborly Giant

Nathan A. Bronstein 17 September 2015

In a hospital, nobody wants to hear the “C-word”, but for many of us, cancer becomes a very real and very scary reality. Personally, I lost both of my grandparents on my mom’s side and my father to the disease by the time I turned 18. The statistics on cancer’s prevalence (although it has been shrinking in recent years) is staggering and terrifying to say the least. The American Cancer Society shows data that about 43% of all men and 37% of all women will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives. As a kid watching my grandparents’ and eventually my father’s treatments, I remember thinking of hospitals and cancer researchers as beacons of hope. The beeping of monitors and the steady flow of white-caped men and women tirelessly moving through hallways gave me the sense that something great and lifesaving was just around the corner. Sadly, in the case of my family members no cure ever came, but I haven’t ever lost sight of that hope and neither should anyone else—amazing progress is being made by researchers and nonprofits every day.

The Susan G. Komen foundation is the largest and most well-known breast cancer organization in the United States. Founded in 1982 in Texas, the organization has expanded to every state in the United States and several

nations abroad. The organization's main goal is to discover a cure for breast cancer, and to this end, the Komen Foundation assists in breast cancer treatment and awareness, as well as raises millions of dollars every year for research. Today, the Komen Foundation's regional Race for the Cure events are the largest and most well-known fundraising events for breast cancer research.

I had the privilege of sitting down with Elaine Grobman, the CEO of the Philadelphia office of the Susan G. Komen Foundation, and Carlos Hernandez, the Program Director of Grants and Public Policy for Komen Philadelphia. The name Komen Foundation should ring a bell since it is one of the most trusted and widely spread brands in America.

You may see the flash of pink from an athletic cleat on a football field, the reflective tint of pink yogurt lids in the supermarket or that familiar pink ribbon on the covers of cereal boxes. The Susan G. Komen Foundation's pink ribbon is one of the most notable symbols of charitable giving in the country. Anything from clothing, food, cars and even oilrig drill bits and buckets of fried chicken have used the color pink to show their support for the Komen Foundation's ongoing mission to find a cure to breast cancer. In transparency, those last two examples may have brought more criticism than support for the brand, but the Komen Foundation still stands as the largest and most widely spread organization in the fight against breast cancer.

When I walked into the Komen Philadelphia office, I

expected the feel of a large corporate brand that has spread to every state in America and several nations abroad. To my surprise, Komen Philadelphia felt more like a small local organization. Grobman quickly explained that while Komen is a very large international organization, it's actually made up of 128 affiliate offices, each varying in size and functionality to cater to their region's needs.

Even still, the 10-person team at Komen Philadelphia is currently serving the needs of 7.4 million people in their 15-county region, which encompasses all of Philadelphia and Camden in addition to three counties in Delaware.

Last year, Komen Philadelphia raised well over a million dollars, every penny of which went to supporting programs that promote breast cancer treatment, research and education. In fact, since 2008, Komen Philadelphia has supported over 70 different organizations through their community grants program, and this doesn't include the countless other events and initiatives launched by the small office, all of which promote advocacy, awareness and supporting individuals and families in need.

Grobman explained for me that part of the advantage of Komen Philadelphia is the mix of having the household Komen brand along with the personable community relations their office has been able to establish. As more than an organization, Komen has managed to create for itself the image of a helpful neighbor that has taken the time to learn about community leaders and collaborate with other members of the community. Carlos Hernandez

describes this process as conducting a community needs assessment. Through this process, Komen examines the health systems that are in place, conducts a policy analysis of a given community and then drills down to the community level to meet community leaders, conduct focus groups and get to know the people they serve.

Through these and similar efforts, Komen has established and maintained partnerships across the city that continue to expand and strengthen their cause. To mention a few, Komen Philadelphia has partnered with most of the major hospitals in the region to support breast cancer care, they've maintained their long partnership with the Mazzone Center and they've established new programs with local universities and colleges. One relatively new program out of Esperanza College at Eastern University motivates students to promote better breast health in their communities, targeting in particular young Latinas. These programs are many the efforts Komen promotes, and their initiatives are supported by tremendous volunteer and young professional networks.

Grobman explained to me that many of their efforts require them to maintain the big traditional events as well as the daily smaller events that keep them in-touch with the community. The Komen Foundation's largest and most well-known event is Race for the Cure.

Philadelphia's Race for the Cure brings in tens of thousands of people and utilizes sponsorships from organizations ranging from the local to the national level.

As much as Komen manages to run the large events; however, they build their network through smaller, more personal events. Hernandez revealed that the day after Race for the Cure, he would be grilling hotdogs to support another event. This is where the real strength of the organization comes to fruition, when each day, the Komen team stays in touch with the people they serve. Each member of Philadelphia's Komen team is fully committed to the mission of finding a cure because many of them have been either directly or indirectly touched by the disease themselves. Speaking with Elaine Grobman in the Philly office made me feel at ease and comforted by the knowledge that there was a team so committed to the cause right here where I live. Before I realized what was happening, I found myself requesting to be added to the young professional network and making a personal commitment to support Komen events in the future.

To find out more information about these upcoming events and to pledge your support, visit their website: <http://komenphiladelphia.org/>

Reference

American Cancer Society. (2014). Lifetime risk of developing or dying from cancer. New York, NY. Retrieved from <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancerbasics/lifetime-probability-of-developing-or-dying-from-cancer>

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