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## Spa-Los Gatos aids cancer patients through massage therapy treatments

By Marianne L. Hamilton for the Los Gatos Weekly-Times  
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Each time Carol Walter steps into the Spa-Los Gatos, she knows a safe haven awaits her. Reclining atop the massage table's snowy sheets, with soothing lights and a trace of music tinkling in the background, she revels in the healing touch of massage therapist Shannon Hartwig. In moments, the rhythms of Hartwig's hands bring Walter respite from her worries.

But Walter isn't the typical spa visitor seeking an hour's escape. Since July 24 the young wife and mother of two has been undergoing aggressive chemotherapy for Stage 3 inflammatory breast cancer. Hers is an extremely rare strain of the disease: Since its presence cannot be detected via traditional mammograms or sonography, IBC often reaches an advanced stage

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prior to diagnosis. Walter will complete eight rounds of chemo to shrink her tumors before sacrificing her left breast in January; radiation and more chemo will follow her surgery. Scarves already camouflage her baldness.

All too often, cancer patients seeking the type of human touch that so restores Walter are told that no services are available to them. But Spa-Los Gatos owner Patti Rice has made it a point to add oncology wellness massage to her long list of treatment options, setting her facility apart from other South Bay spas. As much of the country is observing Breast Cancer Awareness Month this month, Rice has initiated several events to keep the need for breast cancer research at the forefront of the community's consciousness.

Rice

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knows all about wanting to create a safe haven. Growing up in Santa Cruz, with a mother whose relationships with men invariably spiraled downward into alcohol and abuse, Rice's childhood was underscored by welfare, food stamps and depression. When Rice's father blackened both of her mother's eyes, she tossed him out — only to find similarly troubled partners to take his place. By 17, Rice was living and working in San Jose.

Rice's journey from her harrowing childhood to her current status, as the co-owner of one of the town's most luxurious spas, has been one of hard work, careful study and a willingness to reinvent herself — and never forgetting her roots.

"When I decided to add the oncology massage, I kept thinking about my mother-in-law and the dad who adopted me when I was 13. Both of them died of cancer. I would have loved to have been able to give my mother-in-law this type of massage when she was going through her illness," Rice says.

After a career that saw Rice excelling in property management, earning her stockbroker's license at the age of 20, and finally collaborating with partner Larry Schaad in the operation of 27 car washes throughout California, Rice and Schaad finally opened the spa in November of 1999. She says her background in facts and figures left her ill prepared for spa culture. "It was so different from the car washes and gas stations where I'd been working, which are run completely differently," says Rice.

She attended multiple conferences, did her homework and immersed herself in the world of body treatments and spiritual pampering. Her efforts have more than paid off: The Spa-Los Gatos now takes up two floors at its S. Santa Cruz address, and employs a staff of 75.

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Shannon Hartwig of The Spa-Los Gatos performs massage... (George Sakkestad/Los Gatos Weekly-Times)

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Today, Rice is a very visible, active member of both Los Gatos Morning Rotary and the Town of Los Gatos Chamber of Commerce, and has served as the latter group's president for two terms. She attributes her company's success to a management style based on the Golden Rule. "We hire top-notch people and treat them with dignity, kindness and respect, and tell them we expect the same in return. And if that doesn't work for anyone, we tell them this may not be the right place for them."

A pronounced sensitivity to the needs of her customers also has guided Rice. When more and more clients began requesting services that might help them through their cancer treatment, Rice paid attention. "People with cancer would show up here saying they'd asked for a massage someplace else, and they'd been treated as if their disease was contagious," Rice says. "I thought it was important for our therapists to learn to provide services to people with cancer, since massage can be such a healing thing for them."

Rice underwrote the cost of training several of her longest-term employees to perform oncology massage. Hartwig, who has been a massage therapist for six years, says the classes offered her a unique perspective on what cancer patients bring to her table. "It can be really intense; some of the clients want to talk about their illness, and some of them cry," she reports. "But it's always really rewarding, because the person feels really good afterward. It's a very healing, caring form of therapy."

Those requesting oncology wellness massage first complete a form detailing the type of cancer they are confronting, their specific treatments and what areas of their bodies may need either special attention or should be avoided completely. Then a 15-minute conversation between therapist and client helps create an individualized massage plan (the spa requires six weeks between any surgeries and the receipt of massage services). In Walter's case, a medical device implanted in her shoulder makes traditional back massage — which normally would be delivered with her lying face down — virtually impossible. Thus, Hartwig uses pillows to prop Walter on her side, allowing Hartwig to perform the massage while avoiding the sensitive areas.

"I was so glad when Patti said her team could do mid-line massage," Walter says. "Shannon gives me a really wonderful massage each time I'm in there; it's such a relief for me to be able to get this treatment." Hartwig is gratified by her client's response, saying, "I'm very happy that we offer this type of service. Giving oncology massage really makes you feel more in touch with human life."

Mahde Souiri has worked at The Spa-Los Gatos for seven years. He offers a multitude of massage specialties, including pregnancy and warm stone massage, reflexology, deep-tissue massage, Reiki and massage for the obese. Along with Hartwig, Souiri has undergone intensive training to learn how to minister to cancer patients. He gives high praise to Rice for her outreach to those dealing with the disease, noting that many other facilities have yet to make the transition to this unique service offering.

"In some cases spa owners are afraid of the liability; in other cases therapists are uncomfortable working on cancer patients because they're afraid of causing them discomfort," Souiri explains. "But with the proper training, an experienced therapist can gain the touch that is needed to trigger the healing response."

Like Hartwig, Souiri says he pays special attention during the pre-massage intake session to guide his treatment. For example, if his client is going through radiation or chemo, he or she may not feel comfortable lying down throughout the entire session, or the massage may prove too stimulating. In such cases Souiri may suggest "energy" work, such as Reiki or polarity therapy. Also, certain oils can burn the skin of those receiving radiation treatments, making their use unsuitable for massage.

"I take everything the client tells me and apply it to giving that person the best possible experience," Souiri says. He also thinks of his own mother, who underwent a double mastectomy during her battle with breast cancer. "This work is really important to me, since we've had plenty of experiences with cancer in our family. Fortunately my mom's healthy and happy these days, and usually too busy with yoga or her other activities for me to give her a massage," says Souiri.

To further increase the visibility of the fight against breast cancer, Rice and her employees are extending their activities beyond the spa's massage rooms: On Oct. 25, they will participate in the "Making Strides Against Breast Cancer" event in San Jose, sponsored by the American Cancer Society. Walking together as "Team Healing Touch," Spa-Los Gatos employees will help to raise funds for breast cancer research, and encourage women to experience better health outcomes via breast self-examination and mammograms.

Walter isn't surprised that Rice has made such a commitment to the cause. "Patti is just wonderful, and her staff is bright and shiny, which is just what you need when you walk in there with cancer," she says. "Her place is beautiful, and they pamper me like a queen. Having the oncology massage has really helped to relieve the extra stress of coping with my disease."

"Giving the oncology massage is the most rewarding work I could possibly do," Souiri says. "To be able to give back in that way — it really brings you up."

**The Spa-Los Gatos is at 100 S. Santa Cruz Ave., Los Gatos. For more information about oncology wellness massage, or to make a contribution to Team Healing Touch, call (408) 354-5901 or visit [www.thespalosgatos.com](http://www.thespalosgatos.com).**

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