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Jumping into the Spirit

BY KATHY LATOUR

Everyone knows the feeling of taking a card or small package out of the mailbox, and when you are dealing with cancer, it can be the highlight of the day, says Laurie Marshall, who has watched her mother, Cheryl Whillock, enjoy the cards she has received at her home in Fayetteville, Arkansas, from around the country since her brain tumor diagnosis last fall.

Such a “spirit jump” is exactly what Meaghan Edelstein had in mind when she created Spirit Jump (www.spiritjump.org) as a way to connect patients with people who want to brighten the day of someone with cancer. Indeed, it was personal experience that gave Edelstein the idea. “I was given a 20 percent chance of survival,” says Edelstein, who was diagnosed at 28 with stage 3 cervical cancer in 2007.

Edelstein, a law student at the time of her diagnosis, started blogging as a form of therapy and found herself connected with hundreds of other young survivors and their friends and family. Soon, she says, she was surrounded with support in the form of cards, balloons, and small gifts. They were her solace on days she needed to feel loved and cared for as she endured chemotherapy, numerous operations, and ultimately the loss of a kidney. As she regained her energy she wanted to help other cancer survivors who didn’t have the same kind of support.

In November 2008 she launched Spirit Jump, enrolling both “jumpers,” those who want to give support, and “jumpees,” those with cancer who need support. One of the first she engaged was Stacy Billow, a 24-year-old Ohio resident with stage 4 melanoma, who connected with Edelstein online and has now become a Spirit Jump co-founder.

Those with cancer become jumpees by enrolling on the website, after which their information is confirmed, including their willingness to have their mailing address made public. Jumpers who want to help sign up on the website with details on what they want to provide—from cards to handmade gifts. Edelstein sends out a weekly list of those needing support to those offering support.

Since its inception the group has connected around 200 people as jumpees and now has more than 600 jumpers.