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JoAn Nicely

BY LACEY MEYER

In the three years after her 2002 breast cancer diagnosis, JoAn Niceley, a hair stylist and wig specialist from Long Beach, Mississippi, was named Breast Cancer Survivor of the Year by the Memorial Hospital of Gulfport, and President George W. Bush recognized her volunteer work with the American Cancer Society's Look Good ... Feel Better program. If a survivor entered her salon needing a wig, she would try to get one for them, sometimes for free and usually out of her own pocket.

But in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Many coastal Mississippi residents lost close to everything. "As Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast, everything came to a screeching halt," Niceley says. "The one thing it did not stop was cancer."

By then, Niceley was unable to afford to help everyone who entered her salon needing a wig. "Not only did they lose their wigs, they lost everything they owned," Niceley says. "It just broke my heart."

She placed a pink heart-shaped box at her styling station asking for donations to help purchase wigs for cancer patients—the beginning of Pink Heart Funds.

To further raise money for survivor wigs, Niceley dedicated herself to writing a cookbook and her own personal survivor story. A few months after Katrina, just as Niceley completed her cookbook, she met Michele Hirata, who had lost her mother to breast cancer. Hirata, a designer of handmade head covers given free to cancer patients, joined Niceley to become co-founder of Pink Heart Funds.

"She gave me a front page in her cookbook after knowing me one week," Hirata says. "This lady's got a huge heart." The cookbook, *Appetite for Living: Pink Ribbon Recipes*, sold more than 2,300 copies in four months.

Niceley and Hirata held a Hearts with Hope festival in May, which raised more than \$6,000 and inspired 18 people to donate their hair to a popular organization providing wigs to children. After the festival three children with cancer approached Niceley needing a wig because the other organization had turned them down because their hair loss was not considered long-term or permanent.

In response, Niceley and Hirata created their own hair donation program, the [Pony Tail Club](#), as another branch of Pink Heart Funds. The organization provides free wigs for children without insurance regardless of what caused the hair loss. If insurance covers a wig, Pink Heart Funds will help fill out the paperwork.

"It is most devastating to lose your hair," Niceley says. "I know from my own experience from cancer, and having hair as soon as you lose it is an important

factor in your recovery. Hair is part of your well-being and self-esteem.”

The first official Pink Heart Funds fundraiser was held on the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, raising more than \$14,000. Coastal native Robin Roberts, 46, a host of “Good Morning America,” spoke at the August 29 event. “You’ve met JoAn, you don’t say ‘no’ to JoAn,” Roberts told the sold-out crowd, speaking for the first time about her recent breast cancer diagnosis.

“Her passion and her heart is so much a part of the Pink Heart Funds,” Roberts said. “And when I first met her and she told me of this group and I felt her passion, I wanted to very much be a part of something and to do something to help because I am also someone who lives by the heart.”

The organization (www.pinkheartfunds.com) provides wigs and breast prostheses, as well as resources and a hotline for callers seeking support or advice.