

Chapter 20 • What UPLIFT Does

I have written many books, but the one – the one – of which I am most proud is UPLIFT. This book helps women at a terrifying time. It boosts their spirits, convinces them that they will get through treatment and thrive. It makes them smile in the dark of the night – and this is important. There are, in fact, studies suggesting that emotions affect body chemistry, that happiness leads to an increase in illness-fighting cells in the bloodstream, that laughter can reduce pain. Does smiling actually make us live longer? I don't know about that. But it sure enhances our quality of life.

Consider these recent entries in the Survivor's Journal on my website.

“I found out that I have breast cancer four days ago. My husband bought me tons of books on the subject. They were too scary. I went to Amazon and saw UPLIFT, and I just got it tonight. I am laughing and crying and empathizing all at the same time. I feel like I am part of a support group already.” Or this. “An old friend gave me UPLIFT after I had surgery for breast cancer this past summer. I would read a portion of it at a time, and re-read some parts when I needed the extra reassurance.” Or this. “How uplifting to read the number of years that some are post-diagnosis. You all give me the gift of hope! Thank you so very much, as I needed to hear this message today.”

But there's a bigger piece to the UPLIFT pie that most of you haven't seen. It's the breast fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital that UPLIFT helped to create and continues to fund. Under the brilliant hand of Dr. Barbara L. Smith, Director of the Breast Program at MGH, the fellowship offers fully-trained surgeons an additional year of training focused on innovative breast cancer treatment and research. Known within MGH circles as the Team Uplift Fellowship, the program reaches beyond one institution. Though still based at Mass General, the fellows deepen their experience by spending time at two MGH Partner institutions, Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) and Dana Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI).

The first fellow began her year in July 2003. Once word of the fellowship spread, support grew within the medical community, resulting in some years when two fellows have served. Fellows have come from all over the country – actually, from all over the world. Indeed, Dr. Srila Samphao, currently Breast Surgeon Prince of Songkhla University in Thailand, was a fellow in Boston during the 2008-2009 season.

As of the publication of this 10th Anniversary Edition of UPLIFT, there will have been fourteen amazing participants. That's fourteen doctors spending the next several decades working to improve the treatment of breast cancer.

Each June, I get to have tea with the year's fellows and hear face-to-face about the work that they've done. Talk about uplifting! I leave that tea riding high – and, trust me, it ain't from the caffeine in the tea. These fellows are remarkable.

It occurred to me that maybe you'd like to hear from them, too. When I asked for a few words, they sent glowing reports. This is a tribute to Dr. Smith, who inspires them as she inspires me, but it also points to the hope about the future that these fellows feel.

I'd like to share their words with you. And not only their words. Take a look at the medical positions they're holding after their fellowship year. This will blow you away.

July 2003 – June 2004

Julie L. Jones, MD Director, Saints Breast Care Center, Saints Medical Center, Lowell, MA

“The Partners Fellowship was the high point of my surgical training. Dr. Barbara Smith is an amazing mentor, and helped me to generate an expertise for which I am grateful, and which I try to pass on every day.”

July 2003 – December 2003

Marissa M. Howard-McNatt, M.D., Assistant Professor, General Surgery at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, Winston-Salem, NC

“My experience as a breast surgery fellow was invaluable. The fellowship allowed me to gain knowledge not only about the surgical care of breast cancer patients, but also their medical management, radiation treatments, reconstructive options, and psychosocial concerns. I was given the tools to perform clinical research studies in order to improve my knowledge in the field, and learned to have a compassionate eye for the breast cancer patient's needs and concerns.”

July 2004 – June 2005

Katherina Zabicki Calvillo, MD, FACS – Associate Surgeon, Brigham and Women's Hospital/Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA

“The breast fellowship at MGH/BWH/DFCI is unlike any other in the country. You are able to work with sixteen breast surgeons, giving you the rare opportunity to observe different practice styles at internationally-renowned medical centers. What a breast fellowship does is teach you how to operate on breast cancer patients with the mentality of an oncologist, rather than a general surgeon, considering all aspects of a patient's care, such as medical oncology, radiation oncology, and high-risk genetics. You also have the ability to hone your imaging reading skills. These are all aspects of treating breast cancer patients that you don't really get during your general surgery training.”

August 2004 – June 2006

Francisco Dominguez, Cancer Surgeon at Cancer Centre Universidad Catolica de Chile
Santiago, Chile

“My training at the MGH’s fellowship in breast surgery was the most comprehensive and significant learning period of my medical training. The multidisciplinary approach to cancer care definitely helped me learn how to take care of my patients in the most professional and unique way. Health care professionals at MGH are focused on getting the best treatment with the least possible side effects for breast cancer patients. I learned how breast oncologists are always looking for better treatments, with their minds always open to clinical research, and putting into practice new diagnostic or treatment advances. They showed me different approaches to a variety of patient problems and encouraged me to make decisions based on the patient’s best interest.”

July 2005 – June 2006

Dalliah M. Black, MD, FACS, Breast Surgical Oncologist, Sibley Memorial Hospital,
Washington D.C.

“The breast surgical oncology fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital provided me with invaluable experience in the latest breast cancer techniques, contributing to the scientific arena, and most importantly learning how to provide each patient with personalized care and the highest level of compassion. I am honored that women entrust their cancer care to me.”

July 2006 – June 2007

Laurie Kirstein, MD Breast Surgeon, Beth Israel Medical Center, NY, NY

“Deciding to do a breast surgical oncology fellowship was the best decision I have made. It was the result of a path that was influenced by personal and professional experiences. In my first rotation as a medical student, I rounded on a woman as her bandages were removed from her recent mastectomy. The scar was hideous, and there was no addressing the psychological impact this had on her. My immediate thought was, “There has to be a better way than this.” Throughout my surgical residency, I had peripheral contact with breast cancer patients in the operating room or immediately postoperatively, but was never involved in their workup or follow-up. I yearned to know more about the management of the disease, but also to form a relationship with these women to make sure they were getting all of their needs addressed, not only physically but psychologically and emotionally.

“I had high expectations coming into this breast fellowship. Since there are only a handful of fellowship-trained breast surgeons in the country, I knew the education I would be receiving was special. The breast fellowship was over and away my best year of training. Because the fellowship is multidisciplinary, I was able to fill in the gaps of knowledge. Breast surgeons are the gatekeepers for care. Because of my fellowship, I know that I am referring my patients appropriately for chemotherapy and radiation, which has an impact on their overall survival. And because of the oncoplastic techniques and careful thought to incision planning taught during my fellowship, most of my patients have beautiful cosmetic results. I have often said that when my patient looks in the mirror at her chest, I don't want her first thought to be of the cancer. In my fellowship, I learned the techniques to achieve this goal.”

September 2005 – March 2007

Jennifer Rusby, MD, Breast Surgeon at Royal Marsden Hospital, Sutton, UK

“The research fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital enabled me to investigate the anatomy and pathology of the nipple in detail which has helped provide a scientific basis for nipple-sparing mastectomy. Coincidentally, this week I am speaking at a conference in Washington DC on the safety of nipple-preservation in risk-reducing mastectomy. The invitation to speak is a direct result of the work I did at MGH.”

July 2007 – June 2008

Colleen D. Murphy, MD Medical Director, Porter Comprehensive Breast Care, Denver, CO

“My breast surgery fellowship gave me the opportunity to learn from surgeons, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, pathologists and radiologists who are the world's leading experts in breast cancer. As I started practice, I quickly found this cutting-edge and well-rounded knowledge base gave me all the tools I needed to build a multidisciplinary breast cancer program in a community that previously lacked access to comprehensive cancer care.”

July 2007- June 2008

Sara H. Javid, MD, Breast Surgeon at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, Seattle, WA

“The breast surgery fellowship provided me a unique and wonderful opportunity to learn from many experts in their respective fields how to best care for my patients with breast cancer. I took away many skills, one of the most important being how to appropriately tailor each patient's treatment plan not only to her cancer but to fit with her own personal goals and desires.”

June 2008 – July 2009

Amanda Wheeler, MD Medical Director of Legacy Meridian Park Breast Health Center, Portland, OR

“This was the most rewarding year of my academic life. The expertise I gained through my fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and Brigham and Women’s Hospital has allowed me to offer quality care to the women in my community who are diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. Dr. Smith should be recognized; her dedication to training breast surgeons is truly heroic.”

July 2009 – June 2010

Elizabeth Kim, Assistant Professor of Surgery, Wayne State University, Karmanos Cancer Institute, Detroit, MI

“The fellowship was an invaluable experience for me to hone my clinical and operative skills with world-class breast surgeons. I finished my fellowship with an unforgettable life lesson about myself: There is nothing in the world that can compare with the true joy I feel when caring for breast cancer patients. I value this relationship, and it is what sustains me and inspires my creativity in the area of breast research. I am very grateful for the opportunity I had to learn from the MGH breast surgeons. My program director, Dr. Barbara L. Smith, was a role model in becoming an excellent breast surgeon and leader. This fellowship has allowed me to provide world-class breast cancer care in Michigan. I am excited for the future breast fellows who will have this opportunity at MGH.”

July 2010 – June 2011

Suzanne Coopey, MD, Breast Surgery Fellow Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA

“The breast fellowship at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and Brigham and Women’s Hospital has been an amazing learning experience. I have worked closely with breast surgeons, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, pathologists, radiologists, and plastic surgeons who are leaders in their fields. This has given me such an appreciation for the multidisciplinary treatment of breast cancer patients and afforded me the opportunity to do collaborative clinical research projects. This has been one of the best and most important years of my life, and I look forward to the career that lies ahead of me as a breast surgeon.”

Rereading these statements, I am in awe yet again. The idea that UPLIFT has helped bring this about is mind-boggling. I like to think that my mother, dead when I was eight but always my mentor, is smiling down on me and is proud.

Every survivor gives back in her own way. UPLIFT is mine. But you all have played a role as well. You are the ones who buy this book and give it to friends, and those sales are what funds this fellowship.

On behalf of the fellows, the hospital, the breast care community, and every woman who has been or will be diagnosed with breast cancer, I thank you.