



# BreaCan

Year in Review 07/08

# Anita's Story...

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003 I was devastated. At 66, I had an adult daughter I adored and a teaching job I loved. I had beaten a first bout of cancer ten years before and this was my great fear—that it would come back. When I found a lump I just knew. I was consumed with anxiety and when I was diagnosed it was a roller-coaster of emotions. None of my family or friends had been through this – the feeling of isolation was overwhelming. I clung to my work but at the same time was worried I might have to give it up. My friends did their best to be sympathetic and understanding but I was searching for someone to talk to who knew what it was like. I was lucky to have my daughter who was my absolute rock.

By the time I heard about BreaCan I was desperate; they soon became my ray of hope. From the moment I walked in everyone was wonderful. I went to every session I could; for me the educational ones were the most beneficial. I don't have a computer at home so the resource centre was fantastic for me and I read everything I could find. I got involved in *A Chorus of Women* because I thought we were just going to sing. I didn't realise how helpful the talking, writing, laughing and crying would be. The project and these women became my whole life for a few months. The bond quickly formed between the ten of us as we learned how to depend on each other to get the performance ready.

Shortly after *A Chorus of Women* I was diagnosed again, for the third time and it meant a mastectomy. It was a horrible situation and I should have fallen to the depths having my third diagnosis and because of these beautiful people I didn't. I literally sailed through it and that's unreal. I woke up out of the anesthetic and there were Marcelle and Leola (women from *A Chorus of Women*) with brochures and advice. I didn't have time to go down to the depths, all these people sitting there, smiling at me, being such a terrific support really made me come through it. I couldn't have done it without them, I know. These women have become a very special part of my life. Our regular catch ups are the highlight of my month. BreaCan gave me the information, support, understanding and confidence that I was going to get through this. I wish that many more women going through cancer could take part in similar projects.

#### NOTE ON THE COVER:

Sashiko is a Japanese form of embroidery. It is a decorative and strengthening method applied to fabric so that it may carry a heavy load. In early 2008, BreaCan held a workshop for women to learn the art of sashiko.

#### QUOTES:

Please note that some names have been changed

## Contents

Manager's Message	3
About Us	3
Resource Centre	3
12 Month Highlights	4
Public Healthcare Award	5
Information and Support	6
Information and Support	7
Our Volunteers	8
Our Staff	8
Our Advisory Group	9
BreaCan at a Glance	9
Extending Our Reach	10
Program in Focus	12
Relationships with	
Service Providers	14
Looking Forward	15
Thank You	15

DESIGN Lin Tobias/La Bella Design

TEXT Melissa Bowen

PRINT Red Rover Pty Ltd on 150gsm Revive Recycled

OCTOBER 2008



## Manager's Message

During the past year BreaCan has continued to grow and flourish. Undoubtedly, being the winner of the 2007 Victorian Public Healthcare Award – Innovation in models of care category was a highlight for the service. We felt such a sense of achievement as the award publicly recognised the commitment of the staff and volunteers to building a quality service. It certainly inspired us to continue to do good work throughout the year.

We believe that working together with clinical services, cancer support services, consumer groups, government and health professionals is integral to BreaCan's role. Earlier this year we established the BreaCan Advisory Group to provide advice, guidance and support for BreaCan's future service development. In a short period of time the consumers and service providers who comprise the Group have each brought valuable perspectives about the needs of women with breast and gynaecological cancers and possible service strategies for the future. The Group will assist BreaCan maintain both its responsiveness to women and its relevance in regard to the State Government's cancer agenda and the cancer services system as a whole.

There is increasing recognition and discussion about the value of "supportive care". Within the context of BreaCan's philosophy and scope as a community based, women centred service, "supportive care" means providing information, support and care for women on a whole gamut of issues whether at time of diagnosis or as they grapple with the issues of living with cancer. It may be about how to: make decisions about treatment options; tell the news of a diagnosis to family members, friends or work colleagues or; have the opportunity to simply talk to someone else who has been through the experience, and to feel less alone and more empowered.

The focus of BreaCan is very much about drawing on women's lived experiences to help shape how the service can best respond to their needs. We also have a role in complementing the clinical knowledge and expertise of health professionals because we know that a diagnosis of cancer affects every aspect of a woman's life.

Undeniably, the heart of the service is its women - including our peer support volunteers. We continue to learn from and be inspired by the women who use BreaCan – their experiences, wisdom and resilience. Often stories are the way we make sense of our own experiences but sometimes it is also to help another woman – to connect with or share her burden.

Looking forward, there are numerous opportunities for BreaCan to both initiate and be part of. We believe we have developed a very effective model of supportive care which has the scope to influence the care and support for women. I would like to thank the commitment and hard work from staff and volunteers, friends of BreaCan and donors who have given their time, skills and support in many ways – all of which contribute to making the service as unique as it is.

Di Missen *BreaCan Manager*

## About Us

**BreaCan is a unique information and support service for Victorian women living with breast and gynaecological cancers. Women often report feeling confused and being overwhelmed with medical information when diagnosed with cancer. Many find it hard to find someone to talk to; someone who's been in their shoes.**

As a service of Women's Health Victoria, BreaCan presents an opportunity for women to connect and speak with trained peer support volunteers. The volunteers have all experienced cancer themselves or cared for someone who has. BreaCan offers women a holistic support and information service that works in tandem with their medical treatment and existing support systems. It is a state wide service that is confidential and free.

Over five years, BreaCan has developed programs and systems based on the advice and needs of over 5000 users, recognising that every woman's experience is different. Together women and their families can access information, participate in activities and programs and share their stories.

BreaCan aims to empower women to understand and participate in decisions about their care and treatment. The service also aims to support women who having completed treatment, want to regain some sense of control of their health and adjust to living well with cancer. Whilst women often participate in BreaCan programs for a specific period of time, the goal is that they take with them greater strength, lasting memories, new interests and sometimes lifelong friends.





# Resource Centre

The BreaCan Resource Centre offers women a safe place to access information, participate in programs and share their stories with other women.

Many women acknowledge the importance of the service being located away from a hospital environment. BreaCan has worked hard to create a relaxed environment where women can get away from the rigorous routine of treatment.

The majority of BreaCan's information sessions and programs take place in the comfort of the Lonsdale Street Centre. The Resource Centre houses a large collection of books, DVDs, CDs and pamphlets on cancer, health and well-being. Women and their families are welcome to browse or borrow from the collection.

The centre is staffed by our dedicated team of volunteers who work alongside a small staff team. Whilst BreaCan continues to develop a program of scheduled activities, the service believes it is imperative that women and their families can still drop in whenever they like at any stage of their cancer journey. The Resource Centre is a central place where women can connect with other women who are living well, to normalise their feelings and anxieties and discuss ways to adjust to living with cancer.

The Centre is located at:  
Queen Victoria Women's Centre  
210 Lonsdale St. Melbourne VIC 3000

**HOURS OF OPERATION**  
Monday 10am-2pm  
Wednesday 10am-2pm  
Thursday 10am-2pm











**The Resource Centre is accessible to rural women for the price of a local call: 1300 781 500**

## 12 Month Highlights



**BreaCan gave me the help that no-one else was able to give me and in doing so allowed me to take control of my life.**

Mary-Anne, aged 55

-  BreaCan turns 5!
-  2,125 contacts during the past year which is 5.5% growth from the previous year.
-  Winner of the 2007 Victorian Public Healthcare Award: "Innovation in models of care".
-  Finalist in the category 'Best Educational Multi-Modal Production' in the 2007 Enhance TV ATOM (Australian Teachers of Media) Awards, for the DVD production of *Young Women Talking*.
-  Recruitment of 13 new volunteers including two women affected by gynaecological cancer.
-  Presentation of two regional forums in Gippsland for health professionals and consumers. Forums conducted in collaboration with La Trobe Regional Hospital and Gippsland Regional Integrated Cancer Service.
-  First meeting of the newly established BreaCan Advisory Group.
-  Secured funding from Cancer Australia for a two year initiative, Reaching out to women with gynaecological cancers: Innovations in supportive care in collaboration with the North Eastern Metropolitan Integrated Cancer Service.
-  Agreement to develop a music therapy program in partnership with the Royal Women's Hospital, The Royal Melbourne Hospital and Western Health.
-  Internal partnership agreement for governance and business services finalised between BreaCan and Women's Health Victoria.



We applaud the winners and finalists for their commitment to excellence and encourage you to be inspired by their endeavours.

Department of Human Services

# Public Healthcare Award

## WINNER: INNOVATION IN MODELS OF CARE

*“Making a difference through lived experience, innovation and partnership”*

**In September 2007 BreaCan was thrilled to receive its first Victorian Public Healthcare Award.**

These highly contested awards are the most prestigious accolades to which a Victorian health service can aspire. The annual awards recognise the initiative, expertise and dedication of service providers across the state. Over 220 entries, representing the best in Victoria’s healthcare system, were nominated across 10 categories in 2007.

Among the diverse group of winners were dietary, dental, cardiac and paediatric service providers. BreaCan was awarded top spot in its category; Innovation in models of care. This category recognises services that look outside the square, the ones who strive to meet the needs of their users and are flexible and diverse enough to do so.

BreaCan was judged the winner by a panel that included academics, representatives from non government organisations, consumers and other healthcare providers. The judges looked to recognise services that work effectively in partnerships. BreaCan has long maintained a commitment to forming and developing strong links with the healthcare professionals to provide collaborative support.

A terrific night was had by all at the Public Healthcare Awards Ceremony at the National Gallery of Victoria. BreaCan staff and two long time volunteers shared the excitement on the night. BreaCan is very pleased to have been recognised as a category winner. It is a huge achievement for the service. Along with the excitement of winning an award, the night was a valuable opportunity to meet and learn from many other healthcare service providers doing wonderful work in Victoria.

*The BreaCan environment creates a safe place, a warm haven, somewhat like a cosy nest... it confirmed for me that not only do we need good souls to help us through this cancer journey, but a unique environment as well.* Rhoda, aged 46





## One-on-One

Many women prefer a one-on-one service. Women can talk to a volunteer confidentially about what they want, when they want. Women come to BreaCan with many different questions. These may include: How do I tell my children? My partner is not coping so how might I access counselling? What will my reconstructed breast look like? How might I cope with the side effects of chemotherapy? Having a discussion with a trained volunteer who has been through a similar experience gives women the chance to explore a range of practical, emotional and psycho-social issues, knowing that the volunteer has also faced some of these challenges and can acknowledge them in a very empathetic way. At the resource centre volunteers are on hand for a face to face chat and no appointments are necessary. They are also able to direct women to resources and other services that may assist. Volunteers also have a thorough knowledge of the Centre's 300 catalogued items available for loan.

For women unable to attend the resource centre, one-on-one support services are available via phone or email.

# Information & Support

Every woman's cancer experience is different and each will prefer to access and use BreaCan's services in their own way. BreaCan has worked hard to diversify the ways information and support is delivered to best meet the needs of as many women as possible.

It's been a very busy year at BreaCan with over 80 events, including information sessions, group programs and creative workshops, attended by more women than ever before.



## Group Programs

Many women who contact BreaCan express an interest in getting involved in the BreaCan community and meeting other women. BreaCan provides centre based programs that offer women living with early or advanced breast or gynaecological cancer the opportunity to share experiences and broaden their own support networks. It is the peer support element that distinguishes BreaCan from other services.

Attendance at BreaCan's group programs was up by almost 50% from the previous year.

BreaCan recognises that women living with cancer need a lot more information than just medical advice. Over the past year BreaCan has expanded and diversified its information sessions and group programs. They involve medical specialists, health professionals or creative therapists who work collaboratively with BreaCan sharing their knowledge and expertise to inform and support women. Many of BreaCan's programs will relate specifically to living with cancer, but some of the creative group sessions are about simply living it up! Just ask the women who participated in the African drumming session.

In 2007-2008 BreaCan held a record number of events, including 28 *What's On* sessions attended by an average of 20 women per session. This represented a 14% increase from the previous year. Reflexology sessions are now held every fortnight due to demand. Among the most popular initiatives is the *Feel Good* fortnightly exercise sessions. Conducted by a qualified instructor, they help maintain upper body mobility, flexibility and a smile.

BreaCan now has over 2000 consumers and health professionals on the mailing list. Newsletters keep service users up to date with everything available and new at BreaCan.

**This year BreaCan's sessions and programs were more diverse than ever. They included:**

- Demystifying Chinese Medicine
- The impact of fatigue
- Breast reconstruction
- Naturopathy
- Stress and anxiety
- Sexuality and intimacy
- African drumming
- Thai Chi
- Identity issues and living with cancer
- Osteoporosis
- Nutrition and exercise
- Breast forms
- Aromatherapy
- Art therapy
- Music therapy
- Dance
- Creative writing
- Sashiko – Japanese embroidery (See our Cover!)



## Making Connections

*Making Connections* is tailored to the needs of women with advanced cancer. It encompasses specialised information sessions and group programs such as *Here and Now* which is an 8 week program co-facilitated by two experienced professional group leaders. Depending on the participants, the weekly sessions are conducted either face-to-face or via phone participation. The program offers an opportunity to discuss a range of issues often faced by women with advanced cancer including grief and loss, intimacy and sexuality, treatment, death and dying, talking with family and friends.

BreaCan has worked hard over the past year to promote *Here and Now* throughout hospitals and other healthcare providers and to women in regional areas. Accessibility of these programs is of paramount importance. BreaCan is constantly expanding its mailing list for women with advanced cancer, understanding that for these women this will often be an important resource and link to the service. BreaCan also has a specialised recommended resource list to help women living with advanced cancer navigate the library of DVDs, CDs and pamphlets.

Programs and information sessions run through *Making Connections* in the past year include:

- Meditation
- Music therapy
- Pain management
- Stress and anxiety

*Making Connections*, and specifically *Here and Now*, aims to provide participants with an ongoing peer support group. Many women report that as a result of participating in the program they maintain contact and find a very special source of support in one another.

## Gynaecological Cancers

In May 2007 BreaCan opened its doors to women living with gynaecological cancers. Each year around 1000 Victorian women are diagnosed with cervical, ovarian, uterine/endometrial and vulval cancers. There are fewer support services in the community for these women than for those diagnosed with more prevalent cancers.

BreaCan has worked hard over the past 12 months to grow and tailor the support service offered to women living with these cancers and improve the awareness of BreaCan within the gynaecological cancer sector. It was important that as part of the recent volunteer recruitment process, women with gynaecological cancer were included. Existing volunteers have also undertaken training to ensure they have an understanding of gynaecological cancers and can provide support to all women accessing the service.

Many of the issues faced by women living with gynaecological cancers are shared by those with breast cancer but others are quite different. A focus this year has been to continue to identify the commonalities and differences in the issues faced by women living with gynaecological cancers and those with breast cancer.

BreaCan has taken several steps in the past 12 months to improve our service to women living with gynaecological cancers, establish partnerships in the sector and create awareness of BreaCan's expanded role. These include:

- Recruited two volunteers experienced in living with gynaecological cancer
- Produced a recommended resource list
- Established and expanded contact with stakeholders from the gynaecological cancer sector
- Established and expanded our gynaecological cancer service provider mailing list
- Received a \$40,000 grant from Cancer Australia to develop a pilot project *Reaching out to women with gynaecological cancers: Innovations in supportive care* with the North East Metropolitan Integrated Cancer Service
- Conducted a Pampering Day in association with Ovarian Cancer Australia (formerly OvCa)
- Hosted a display table at Ovarian Cancer Australia's Australian Patient Forum
- Conducted specific information sessions for women with gynaecological cancers including, lymphoedema and music therapy.



I hadn't felt the need to attend a support group when I was first diagnosed. I really turned away from that sort of help. When I was diagnosed with advanced disease last year, I questioned whether I needed it. I saw the (BreaCan) morning tea advertised and it was called "Coffee, Cupcakes & Connections". Well the cupcakes sold me – I felt I wanted to come and connect with other women.

Jenny, aged 62

You never know what a place will be like when you first walk in the door. But BreaCan...it has just felt so welcoming and comfortable.

Toni, aged 44 diagnosed with ovarian cancer



# Our Volunteers

At the heart of BreaCan is a dedicated team of trained volunteers. Each of these women has had a personal experience with breast or gynaecological cancer or cared for someone who has. In addition to their invaluable life experience, each has committed to undertake the volunteer training program to enable them to meet the needs of service users. The empathy and commitment of these women is what makes them BreaCan's greatest asset.

Peer support is central to everything BreaCan offers. It is through these women's compassion and life experiences that women contacting the service are able to feel heard, understood and 'normal'. By being themselves and sharing their stories in a helpful and meaningful way, BreaCan's volunteers make an immeasurable difference.

With the expansion of BreaCan to service the needs of women with gynaecological cancers together with the ever growing number of people who use the service, the recruitment and training of volunteers was a clear focus during the past year. In late 2007 BreaCan undertook a massive recruitment, development and training program to expand the team of volunteers and the scope of the role. This process is due to be finalised in the second half of 2008.

Each volunteer brings a different perspective, experience and set of skills. Finding the right people for each new intake is a labour intensive process including advertising, assessing applications and conducting interviews.

In January 2008 over 1,200 women on BreaCan's mailing list were informed about the upcoming volunteer intake and encouraged to make contact if they were interested in applying. Newspaper advertisements were run in local papers. Posters were distributed to over 100 key service providers. From the responses, 13 women were offered a place in the volunteer training program which consists of 45 hours of training over 7 weeks. Two of BreaCan's newest volunteer recruits have a gynaecological cancer.

This year BreaCan continued to expand the skills of existing volunteers, providing a series of training initiatives and personal development programs. Training programs, such as the recent public speaking session, enabled volunteers to capably represent BreaCan at several forums, conferences and events over the past year.

Because of its quality and rigour BreaCan's recruitment and training program has been of interest to other organisations that utilise volunteers in a peer based approach.

Thank you to our volunteers: Ang, Angela, Betty, Christine, Ellen, Florence, Frederika, Heather, Janine, Jenni, Joy, Judy, Jules, Julie, Lea, Mary, Meril, Ojdana, Pam, Pat, Pauline, Rhonda, Rita, Sandra, and Teresa.

BreaCan would like to thank Rosemary who left volunteering at the end of 2007 after being with the service from its inception in 2003.

BreaCan would also like to acknowledge and remember Michele who passed away in December 2007.

*As a volunteer, I found that sharing experiences is of great value to the people I speak with. You can see/hear their relief when they fully realise that this person knows the physical and emotional turmoil they are in from their first-hand experience.* Sandra, BreaCan volunteer

## Our Staff

**Di Missen**  
Manager

**Helen Shepherd**  
Services and Volunteer Co-ordinator

**Nicole Wilton**  
Information and Support Officer

**Justine Dalla Riva**  
Project Officer

**Pip Brennan**  
Casual Information and Support Officer

BreaCan would also like to thank and acknowledge Sacha L'Huillier, Josie Scott, Brigitte Gerstl, Gabrielle O'Brien and Jeanette Liebelt who all worked for the service during the past year. Thank you

L to R: Jeanette Liebelt, Helen Sheperd, Gabrielle O'Brien, Di Missen, Nicole Wilton, Justine Dalla Riva





# Our Advisory Group

One of BreaCan's highlights of the past year was the establishment of the BreaCan Advisory Group.

The purpose of the advisory group is to provide advice, guidance and support for BreaCan's service development and achievement of its service deliverables.

Its terms of reference are to:

Contribute expert knowledge and experience in assisting the service to achieve its service deliverables as outlined in its funding and service agreement with DHS.

Assist in the development of linkages and networks between BreaCan and the cancer service system and consumers of these services

Provide input on emerging needs, issues and trends relevant to women with breast cancer and women with gynaecological cancers as they relate to the aim and strategic priorities of the service.

Contribute to the strategic positioning of the service within the cancer services system and supportive care services

Actively promote the service and its various initiatives in relevant health service settings and the community.

The Advisory Group meets four times a year and its members are;

**Annabel Pollard** *Chair* (WHV Council Member, Clinical Psychologist)

**Heather Beanland** (Consumer)

**Christine Evelyn** (Consumer)

**Bronwyn Flanagan** (Breast Care Nurse)

**Jane Fletcher** (Consumer)

**Angela Hill** (BreastScreen Victoria)

**Jenny Macindoe** (Breast Care Nurse)

**Jane McNeilage** (Gynae-Oncologist)

**Suzanne Phillips** (Consumer)

**Katy Weare** (Nurse Manager)

**Marilyn Beaumont** (WHV Executive Director)

**Di Missen** (BreaCan Manager)

Since beginning in 2003, BreaCan has enjoyed a steady growth in contacts.

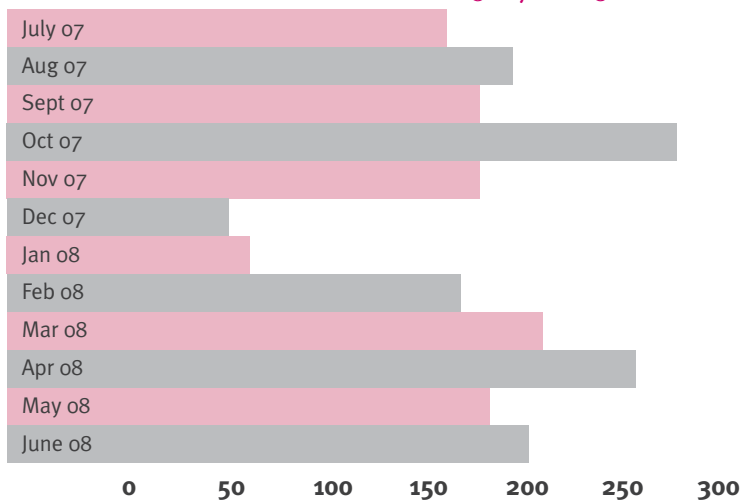
## BreaCan at a glance

### 5 years of growth



For the period of July 2007–June 2008 a total of 2,125 individuals, group and service providers contacted the BreaCan resource centre. This represents a growth of 5.5% from the previous year.

### total service users (July 07–June 08)



### type of contact (July 07–June 08)



“

Although I live in a large rural city, it has a certain small town feel at times. Rumours spread like you wouldn't believe and I dreaded the thought of everyone knowing my business. While in a waiting room at Peter Mac, I picked up a BreaCan brochure. It's now been five years since my first diagnosis, three since my second and I'm still a regular at BreaCan. It's just like coming home. Ann

# Extending Our Reach

Cancer doesn't discriminate; as a result there is no typical BreaCan service user. As a state-wide service, women access BreaCan from throughout Victoria.

This year BreaCan has worked hard to extend its reach to as many women as possible. Women living with breast and gynaecological cancers all need support regardless of age, location or culture. BreaCan aims to make the service accessible and relevant to women from all walks of life.

## Rural Women

Isolation can take many forms and geographical isolation presents special challenges. Many women are not located near local support services and will spend long periods of time away from their families and homes while undergoing treatment. This will put additional pressure on their home and work life. More than 15% of the women who accessed one on one BreaCan services over the past year live in regional Victoria.

In the past 12 months BreaCan has taken several steps to improve its service to women in rural areas

- Teleconferenced *Here and Now* Programs
- Promoted the *Here and Now* program through the Regional Integrated Cancer Services
- Organised resource centre visit by 15 women and 2 health professionals from Gippsland and by 8 women from Avoca
- Made volunteers available via phone and email

Women in regional areas can contact our Resource Centre for the price of a local phone call. Please Call 1300 781 500





## Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

Women from diverse cultural backgrounds may find it particularly hard to access support services when diagnosed. These women are often not aware of, or comfortable in, using the support services available.. More than 20% of women who contacted BreaCan on a one-on-one basis during the past year listed their place of birth as being from a non-English speaking country. Making that initial contact can be particularly daunting for these women. BreaCan understands the importance of making the process as familiar as possible once the first step is taken.

In the past 12 months BreaCan has taken several steps to improve its service to women from different cultural backgrounds.

- Continued use of interpreters
- Production of pamphlet in Arabic for Arabic/ Assyrian women
- Support and advice given to *Here & Now* participant interested in setting up a Jewish support group.

My breast cancer was diagnosed last year. At the time I had been living in Australia for two years, far from my family in Iran and with my only daughter. I became shocked and confused. I realised there would be no other solution than having my treatment in Melbourne. BreaCan has become like my family, close friends as well as a great assistance and support through this entire difficult, long journey. Meena

It is so lovely to come somewhere (BreaCan) which is away from there (hospital) and doesn't smell like chemo. Aislinn, aged 29



## Young Women

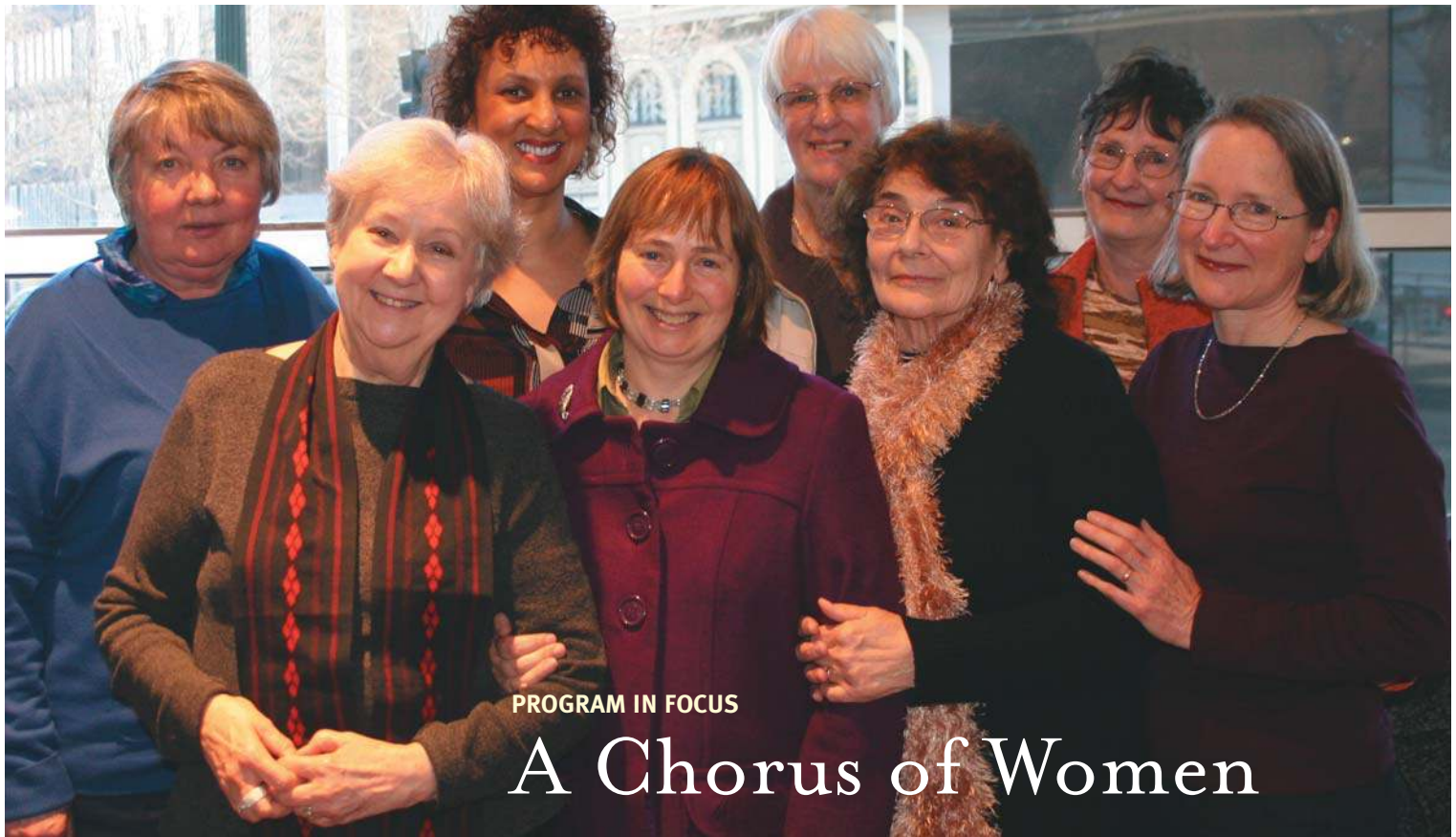
Whilst not the majority, young women living with breast and gynaecological cancer have a specific set of concerns and needs. A cancer diagnosis is always a shock but for young women it can be particularly devastating. They are the least likely to know someone in the same situation and many report feeling socially isolated. Fertility and relationship issues may also be particularly relevant. 18% of women who made contact with BreaCan over the past year were under forty.

In the past 12 months BreaCan has taken several steps to improve its service to young women.

- Attended the first national conference for Young Women with Breast Cancer
- Second edition of *Young Women Talking* DVD produced and distributed nationally in conjunction with The Cancer Council Victoria.

The *Young Women Talking* DVD was chosen as a finalist from 1200 entries at the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) Awards for Best Educational Multi-Modal Production.





PROGRAM IN FOCUS

# A Chorus of Women

## 3 Years On...

The benefits to women of participating in group programs are often only evaluated in terms of the immediate outcomes. However, the story of *A Chorus of Women* which was initiated by BreaCan in 2005, proves that what women gain can be long lasting.

*A Chorus of Women* began as a 12 week music therapy program aimed at offering women an opportunity to express the impact of breast cancer on their lives, through words and music. Emma O'Brien, who also works as a Music Therapist with the Royal Melbourne Hospital was contracted as the facilitator. The 12 week program culminated in the staging of an original theatre production, created and performed by the women using poetry, prose and song. The most common post performance response from the women was that the experience was "cathartic" and "fun". They also had the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings to family members and friends, many of whom were in the audience.

Three years on the women who participated in the program have developed new interests and ways to cope with the challenges of living with breast cancer. They attribute some of the changes in their lives to having participated in *A Chorus of Women*. They talk about their strong connection with each other, having formed 'their own little support group', still meeting once a month. There has been a continuity of connection, way beyond those initial 12 weeks. The women now determine how and when they get together. BreaCan is in the background if they need the service, but they have been empowered to create a support network for themselves. Anita's story on page 2 of this report poignantly captures their care and support for each other.

*A Chorus of Women* was also significant because it used music as the medium for women to express and share their own personal stories. Although only one of the ten women had a music background prior to participating in the program, a number of the women have taken up various creative pursuits since – all of which contribute to them living rich and full lives.



I feel that doing something creative was a different way of looking at all the pain, fears and anxieties, rather than just talking about it.

Leola

I can't sing but I like writing so I thought I'll go along to two sessions... little did I know that one or two weeks got me hooked.

Sandra



Some of BreaCan's initiatives are based on the view that creative therapies provide an avenue of expression which help people to heal and make sense of the impact of cancer on their lives. Emma O'Brien says 'much of the value of music therapy is in the ripple effect; the idea that what you are doing in the space has a life beyond the therapeutic session. Women might write or share their song with family and friends. They are empowered to take it forward in their own way'.

A *Chorus of Women* was much more than just a 12 week project. What began as an idea for a music program, resulted in many long-lasting benefits beyond the performance.

These are the kind of diverse programs that BreaCan is striving to develop.

The *Chorus of Women* are: Noelene, Keiko (deceased Dec 2005), Ann, Florence, Anita, Liz, Leola, Sandra, Pat and Marcelle.

# Relationships with Service Providers



The success and relevance of BreaCan relies heavily on working collaboratively with a range of services in the cancer sector. Like many support services BreaCan believes the best level of care is the result of healthcare providers working in tandem rather than competition. Each year BreaCan establishes new relationships with relevant services to increase its capacity to meet the needs of the women who access its service.

Medical professionals and cancer service providers remain the most common source of referral for BreaCan service users. Their efforts have helped put a record number of women in contact with BreaCan during the past year. Without these referrals, consumers often lack the knowledge of or confidence to make contact with a support service.

Other relationships focus on providing services or functions in conjunction with a wider community.

BreaCan has been involved in many collaborative events, forums and services throughout the year, building on the philosophy that treatment, support and service is best delivered in effective partnership. Some of these included:

- Two regional forums with Latrobe Regional Hospital and Gippsland Regional Integrated Cancer Service
- Worked with Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre to identify and encourage women to participate in two of the Centre's research projects
- Partnered with the North East Metropolitan Integrated Cancer Service to secure funding for a project targeting women with gynaecological cancer
- Worked collaboratively with Ovarian Cancer Australia

BreaCan continues to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its health professionals to best meet the needs of the women who access their service. In return, BreaCan has firmly established itself as a reliable resource for clinical cancer services and health professionals able to offer expertise and advice particularly in regard to the ongoing and emerging issues affecting women, as they define them.



We have been promoting your pampering day since we received a wad of fliers in the mail. It sounds wonderful and we are always happy to spread the word.

Cancer Council Victoria



# Looking Forward



The past five years has been an incredible journey for all involved in BreaCan. From a small pilot project, given just three years of funding, to a credible support service that has tailored a unique peer program unavailable elsewhere in the community.

Objectives for the next year include:

**Diversify the Service.** Continue to develop ways to respond to the needs of diverse groups including young women and those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. This will include thinking creatively about how the service model can better meet the needs of women who are hard to reach.

**Partnerships and Promotion.** Continue to promote the work of BreaCan within the cancer sector and establish and develop partnerships.

**Strategic Plan:** Finalise BreaCan's Three Year Strategic Plan outlining the aims and priorities of the service into the future.

**Volunteer Training and Role Diversification:** Complete the volunteer training program and resource centre orientation. The role of experienced volunteers will be diversified in line with extending the reach of the service.

**Gynaecological Cancer Expansion.** As a relatively new service to women living with gynaecological cancers, BreaCan will continue to build on partnerships, promote its expanded role and tailor the service.

**Feedback.** BreaCan recognises the value of feedback to service quality. In the coming year feedback from service users, volunteers and partners will be more systematically collected and analysed to help direct the way forward.

## Thank You

BreaCan would like to say thank you to all the people who donated their time, money, resources and support to BreaCan over the past year. To existing and new partners, to the team of dedicated volunteers and most importantly to the brave women who have entrusted BreaCan with their stories – you have all helped make BreaCan what it is today.

Thank You.



**PHONE** 1300 781 500  
**FAX** 03) 9921 0840  
**EMAIL** [breacan@breacan.org.au](mailto:breacan@breacan.org.au)  
**WEB** [www.breacan.org.au](http://www.breacan.org.au)

**RESOURCE CENTRE**  
Ground Floor  
Queen Victoria Women's Centre  
210 Lonsdale St  
Melbourne VIC 3000

**HOURS OF OPERATION**  
Monday 10am-2pm  
Wednesday 10am-2pm  
Thursday 10am-2pm

**POSTAL** GPO Box 1066  
Melbourne VIC 3001



Breacan is a service of Women's Health Victoria; A state-wide women's health promotion, information and advocacy service

Breacan is funded by the Department of Human Services

