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Lewisville foundation organizes housecleaning for women in cancer treatment

BY JOHN AUSTIN
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There's nothing like chemotherapy to kill your will to get up and mop, wax and vacuum.

That's why Nansii Downer and her cleaning crew waded in to do it without charge for women who are undergoing cancer treatment.

"I can't make the pain go away. I can't make the fear go away," said Downer, co-owner of a North Richland Hills cleaning company.

"I can't make it better, but I can make home OK."

Downer works with Cleaning for a Reason. The nonprofit, based in Lewisville, organizes professional housekeeping businesses that donate their services to women who are receiving cancer treatment.

The housekeepers will clean the house once a month for up to four months. The maximum each cleaning service will take on at a time is two patients.

For a patient to qualify, physicians must verify her illness.

Debbie Sardone created the Cleaning for a Reason Foundation a little less than three years ago. By her calculation, its volunteers have donated services worth \$180,000.

"It's probably been my greatest joy in my career," said Sardone, who owns a Lewisville-based cleaning company that covers Flower Mound, Frisco and other nearby cities. "We've helped over 1,100 women."

Why just women?

"Our customers are women," Sardone said. "Most maid services are run by women."

"When a woman is sick, women are the ones fretting about the house," Sardone said. "Those are the people who call us, stressed out."

Seeing employees and customers who had suffered cancer and couldn't afford cleaning motivated Sardone, 49, to create the foundation.

Tara Darovec doesn't recall how she heard about Cleaning for a Reason, but she clearly remembers what Downer's volunteers did after her mastectomy, reconstructive surgery and chemo in March. They cleaned her home three times, during the weeks when she was down after chemo and least likely to wield a mop herself.

"It's just an unbelievable experience," said Darovec, a 46-year-old Southlake first-grade teacher and mother whose husband is unemployed. "When you're ill, it seems insurmountable."

Cleaning for a Reason now works with 369 maid services in 41 states and Canada.

The annual budget is about \$56,000, and the foundation has two full-time staffers. The organization is looking for more cleaning-service volunteers as well as donations.

The foundation's operating budget is funded by donations from the cleaning services that do the work. They pay \$20 to \$50 per month per service.

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Gabriela Acosta packs up her cleaning supplies at a Southlake home. STAR-TELEGRAM/STEWART F. HOUSE



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"We are very underfunded," Sardone said. "Nobody knows about it."

Two Tarrant County services, including Downer's, are on board. Sardone's for-profit company, Buckets and Bows Maid Service, has 30 employees and more than \$1 million in revenue. Downer's company, Partners in Grime, has four full-time employees, plus her husband and her.

Sardone has donated cleaning services to about 25 women over the past 2 1/2 years.

"I think we've done five people, total," Downer said. "We just finished another one."

Downer values a typical cleaning job at \$100.

Sardone said that even in affluent places such as Southlake, there are many two-income families that can't afford housecleaning when somebody loses a job.

That was the case at the Darovec home.

"When a woman gets sick, if her house can be kept in order, things are less chaotic," Downer said. "You can't get well if you're not resting. So this takes the pressure off."

Darovec couldn't agree more.

"It's a total blessing," said Darovec, who's back at work despite a second surgery. "Some people are just so caring and giving. It's the kind of experience that makes you reflect on what you can do for someone you don't know."

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