

# CATHOLIC HEALTH WORLD

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### St. Elizabeth promotes good nutrition for cancer patients

If Helene Gruber had never been diagnosed with breast cancer, it's quite possible that St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Edgewood, Ky., might never have become the first hospital in the country to introduce a line of foods made especially for cancer patients.

Gruber, the hospital's director of nutrition services, learned she had cancer in May 2006. She would spend a good part of the next year undergoing first surgery, then chemotherapy and radiation.

With the treatments sapping her strength, Gruber, 52, found herself at home with more time than usual to read. She spotted a *Cincinnati Enquirer* newspaper story about Millard Long, a food entrepreneur in nearby Burlington, Ky., who was working with local farmers in a program known as Kentucky Proud. Long was buying leftover tomatoes and peppers from farmers and turning them into salsas.

Gruber was fascinated. She clipped the story about Long and put it aside. But it would be a year before she called Long and asked to meet with him.

"I like to call it a meeting of two hearts," says Gruber of that first encounter with Long in the fall of 2007. With her background in nutrition at St. Elizabeth and her own experience with cancer, Gruber saw there was a great need for specialized food for cancer patients, both while hospitalized and recovering at home.

"I became much more aware of the lack of nutrition education that is given to people undergoing cancer treatments," she says.

Together, Gruber and Long came up with the idea of developing a line of tasty soups for home use that would be easy to prepare and chock-full of vitamins, minerals, fiber and protein.

"I talked to him specifically about comfort foods, soothing-type foods," recalls Gruber. She gave Long a recipe she calls a "magic mineral broth" of celery, carrots, onions and herbs that Long used as the base for the soups.

Early in 2008, Long went back and forth between Gruber and the chefs at his company, KHI Foods.

"In about four months he had a pretty good line" of soups, says Gruber. She also put Long in touch with a network of breast-cancer survivors, who tried Long's soups and gave him feedback.

By the middle of last summer, Long had developed a line of four soups: Hearty Beef Barley, Savory Chicken, Tomato Cheddar Jack and Vegetarian White Chili. The line also includes artisan whole wheat bread, oatmeal, cookies and vitamin waters made by Giminetti Baking in Cincinnati.

"Nobody really talks about the healing power of vitamins, minerals and nutrients, and the critical need for large amounts of protein" by cancer patients, says Gruber. "You come out of (cancer treatment) so weak. Then there's a great need for rehabilitation, not only nutritionally but also physically, just building up the body strength. Chemo just ratchets the bones down to nothing."

For cancer patients, who may be nauseated and have a suppressed appetite, soups are ideal, says Long, who's been in the food processing business for 26 years. He says one cup of Comfort Care soup has a higher nutritional value than a balanced meal. "There's no other product that compares to the vitamins and minerals that are in there."

After rolling out the food line in early December at St. Elizabeth, Gruber says she sold out of stock the first week. Long is now shipping products to 20 states filling orders placed through the Comfort Care website. Gruber gives the credit to

Long, who she says "has a very big, genuine heart" and "envisioned (Comfort Care) being very big — I didn't. I thought, if we could help a few people, great."

Gruber wants the project to be green-centered, so only glass canning jars are used for the soups, and the manufacturer uses locally grown Kentucky Proud produce. Disabled workers assemble the product into "care packages" that are sold through the [website](#). The site also contains nutrition advice and menu suggestions for cancer patients.

Gruber credits two of her department employees, Sheri Kanarek, who oversees all the hospital's dietitians, and Jennifer Hunt, a dietitian who specializes in cancer nutrition, for their ideas and for helping test the food line.

She also says she probably wouldn't have gotten through her cancer treatment if it hadn't been for the support of the 126 members of the nutrition department at St. Elizabeth, and she says Long sensed that.

"I think that's why he was so intrigued with our project," says Gruber. "Every day, we really live and breathe the healing ministry of Jesus, and it shows. Everyone here is family and supportive of each other. He felt that."

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