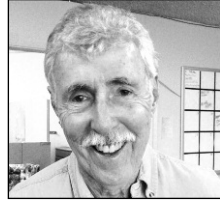


# Perspectives

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

MEL BLOOM

## Ojai Cares lives up to its name



Some of us do things for the glory — laurel wreaths, trumpet blasts, the adulation of the crowd. Some of us do things for the money. Some of us do things for approval. Sometimes outside pressure induces us. Others accept a challenge. Sometimes we do something because it has to be done. But perhaps the most noble reason for doing anything is gratitude. And Susan Kapadia is a star performer in that category. Years ago during a devastating bout with cancer she vowed she would help victims of this most dreaded of maladies. And thus Ojai Cares came to fruition. And though its existence is less than a year and a half, its imprint on our small town is as deep as if it was created by Florence Nightingale or Mother Teresa.

Recently my late wife was diagnosed with incurable cancer and a pharmacist friend suggested Ojai Cares might offer some comfort. Desperate for solace and di-

rection, we attended a meeting. We walked in as strangers and after a second meeting 11 strangers had become dear friends. I suspect that was due to the commonality that all in the meeting (with the exception of myself) were currently plagued with cancer or cancer in remission. My wife had always been a delightfully gregarious person and people intuitively took to her. My nature is considerably more stand-offish and yet I, too, quickly felt the cohesive camaraderie offered by the group as each described their reactions to their personal progress or setbacks. The atmosphere engendered in these meetings was reassuring in that none of us were alone in the trenches. We had companions in the journey of a possible ominous future.

Ojai Cares is more than group therapy. It is a cancer resource center and the matrix for all manner of assistance and comfort. People had told us to get a second opinion

on my wife's diagnosis. I didn't know where to turn and Ojai Cares made all the arrangements for us at the City of Hope, one of the country's most prominent cancer centers, about 90 miles from Ojai. Regrettably their diagnosis corroborated the original one. Nonetheless, we continued the meetings as they were comforting. Ojai Cares has half a dozen professionals to do massages, reiki and reflexology. Other therapists offer classes in guided meditation as well as educational resources to support the emotional healing of individuals and family to help cope with the potential and real ravages of cancer and the desperation of what may lie ahead.

In short, here is where people come together to celebrate life, gain strength from each other and find answers to their questions. All of these services are offered to help one navigate the terrain of the great unknown. There is no

charge for any treatments or services and the entire operation exists through charitable contributions and a few grants it has managed to secure in its brief existence.

Susan started it all and she is fortified in this endeavor by Renee Mandala, an equally empathetic and highly competent human being. They both had grown up on New York's Long Island fairly near to one another, but their paths never crossed until each lived in California and Renee also became a cancer survivor. A mutual friend thought Renee might be comforted by some encouraging words from Susan who had already been on this route and arranged a phone conversation between them. Susan sang to Renee over the phone and immediately the bond between them solidified and Renee soon joined Ojai Cares as the assistant director. I'm frequently addicted by a peculiar proclivity to attach nicknames to peo-

ple I like or admire, so Susan was designated "Big Mama" and Renee as "Little Mama"; and it is ironic because both of these women, while monumental in their abilities and compassion, could be classified in physical stature as delicate or petite which gives credence to the adage "good things come in small packages."

When my wife was bedridden and deep in the throes of her cancer Big Mama called and asked if she could come and speak with me. Though I didn't want to speak with anyone, I couldn't refuse her as Ojai Cares had been a deep source of consolation to both my wife and myself. When Big Mama arrived and it was impossible to hold back my tears, I told her nothing could be said or done by anyone that could ease my way. "So, why are you here?" I asked.

"Because I like you," she replied.

And though that did not make a dent in my shroud of grief, it

touched my heart and was probably the dearest thing I heard during my worst nightmare.

In our gatherings at Ojai Cares there was an unobtrusive candle resting on a table. Though I saw it, I never gave it a thought and just assumed it was part of the decor. A week after my wife's demise I returned to Ojai Cares to thank them for all they did during my wife's ordeal and was greeted by Little Mama who indicated the candle.

"We lit this candle and held hands and said a prayer for Andrea," she told me.

Do rituals matter? Some people say yes; some say no. Others say maybe. Which group is right? All I know is the report of the candle lighting from three-month-old dear friends is embedded in my memory to the end of my days.

Ojai Cares came to fruition because of one woman's gratitude. Is it any wonder many consider gratitude our greatest attribute?