

CÍRCULO DE VIDA (CARMEN ORTIZ, SAN FRANCISCO)

THE STORY

It was just as Carmen Ortiz was finishing her doctorate in clinical psychology that she was diagnosed with breast cancer. After successfully battling the disease, Carmen vowed never to have anything to do with other cancer patients, as this would only bring back the painful memories of her own struggles. Carmen began working at Clínica de la Raza in Oakland as a psychotherapist, when one day she received a call from a Mexican woman named Socoro, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Although Carmen resisted taking on the case, her boss encouraged her to help Socoro, who would no doubt benefit from sitting across from someone who understood the pain she was experiencing. Carmen reluctantly agreed to help.

Through Socoro, Carmen quickly became aware of the complete lack of services available to Latina women living with breast cancer. Because the hospital did not provide translation services, Socoro's daughter had been left to translate for her, an undoubtedly traumatic experience for such a young girl. Although there were plenty of support groups for women with cancer, there were none available to women who did not speak English. Carmen saw that there were countless women just like Socoro, many of whom were immigrants, low-income and without health insurance, left to navigate a frightening illness in an increasingly complex medical system.

As a Latina woman, an experienced psychologist and breast cancer survivor herself, Carmen saw a way that she could combine her expertise and leadership skills to benefit the entire San Francisco Community. In 1992, she became an integral part of the Cancer Support Community's (CSC) Latino Outreach Project, the Bay Area's first Spanish-language program created to provide culturally competent psychosocial support, cancer information and advocacy services to Latinas diagnosed with cancer. In 1995, Carmen took over the project and support group, and members renamed the program *Círculo de Vida* (Circle of Life). She developed and implemented a hospital-based support program for newly diagnosed Latinas at San Francisco General, as well as an in-home support program for Latinas in the terminal phase of their illness.

Through *Círculo*, Carmen established many support groups that provided a safe place in which individuals with similar diagnoses could assist one another with mutual support, understanding and encouragement, and provide an extended family unit to rely on when the cancer or its treatment reaches a critical stage. Whether sitting with a patient as she hears the details of her diagnosis, taking care of a young mother's child while she attends her chemotherapy treatments, or bringing someone a meal because she is too ill to cook, the group members and staff cared for each other like family. When participants referred to the group as their "familia", they did so with the knowledge that support can always be found there.



HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Support Spark in its efforts to raise money for Carmen Ortiz and *Círculo de Vida*. A portion of the proceeds from **Spark's Black and Pink Ball** at the W Hotel on **October 13th** will fund the young mothers program, a language-based support group for young women who are diagnosed with cancer.