

# Doing business for a cause

**At the Hope Chest retail store, women with breast cancer are the ones who profit**

Not long ago, Barbara Hensley got a frightening glimpse of her future. She lost her younger sister to breast cancer in 1994 and lost her older sister to breast cancer two years later. Hensley knew she had to do something to stop the disease that devastated her family.

She had been in corporate executive management for 20 years, most recently for a Fortune 100 company in the Twin Cities, so she decided to put her business savvy to work for a different cause — one that could potentially save lives.

“I didn’t need to be making the money I made in the past,” Hensley says. “I was 52 years old, and I knew that if I wanted to make a difference and really make an impact on breast cancer, I had better do it.”

So she opened the Hope Chest for Breast Cancer, a store that raises money for the cause by selling donated upscale furniture, accessories, and designer clothing. Hensley gets a variety of new merchandise from interior designers, manufacturers, and retail stores going out of business, as well as generous donations of barely used items from the Twin Cities community. She also puts on fund-raising events and accepts monetary donations for breast cancer causes.

Hensley’s store opened just west of Wayzata in November 2002. She hoped she’d be able to give \$50,000 to breast cancer causes after the first year. The store actually netted \$180,000.

In July Hensley gave \$100,000 in proceeds to the University of Minnesota Cancer Center for patient services support and outreach and education programs created especially for the area’s immigrant and underserved populations.

Marva Bohlen, R.N., the Cancer Center’s director of community outreach and education, has seen firsthand how the Hope Chest gift has helped spread the word about early detection. Part of the gift funded a call-in show on a Somali TV station that features a Somali physician answering questions about breast cancer. The two-hour show was a relatively inexpensive way to teach this community about early detection and what it means to be diagnosed, Bohlen says.

Another part of the Hope Chest gift went to replenish the Women’s Cancer Resource Center’s emergency fund. This group has long supported low-income members of the African-American community who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, Bohlen says.

Hensley knows of women who’ve had to choose between getting treatment or paying the rent. “I knew in my soul it wasn’t right and it wasn’t fair,” she says. That’s why — through the emergency fund — the Hope Chest money is being used for rent, heat, groceries, transportation to clinic appointments, and childcare during medical appointments.

The gift funds a similar initiative at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview. Breast Cancer Program Coordinator Susan Pappas-Varco, R.N., says any underserved patient is eligible for this program. She collaborates with social worker Ann Cummings to determine which patients show the greatest need for financial help.

Many have stage 4, or metastatic, breast cancer that has spread in their bodies, says Pappas-Varco, and they’ve probably been living with cancer for several years. “Many of these women have really gone through a lot of their savings and have very few places to turn,” she says.

Hensley wants to fund projects like these year after year and is excited to watch them grow. “The continuity can really make an amazing difference in people’s lives,” she says.

And Hensley has even bigger goals for the future. She eventually wants to raise



After losing her two sisters to breast cancer, Barbara Hensley put her business savvy to use by opening her first Hope Chest. Much of the store’s proceeds are put toward breast cancer efforts.

\$10 million for breast cancer through a chain of Hope Chest stores throughout the country. “It’s having a successful business while at the same time doing good,” she says.

Through the franchise model she created for the Hope Chest stores, Hensley wants to provide opportunities for others to be social entrepreneurs like herself by owning their own stores and making a difference for women with breast cancer at the same time.

To raise the targeted \$10 million, Hensley intends to have 50 operational Hope Chest stores throughout the country. A second store — which Hensley will also own and use as a model for others who might be interested in opening their own store — is in the works in St. Paul. Its projected opening is this June.

And Hensley says she’s got plenty of energy — and motivation — to see that her plan succeeds. “I can dedicate the rest of my life to making a difference in the breast cancer world,” she says.

*To learn more about the Hope Chest for Breast Cancer, go to [www.hopechest.us](http://www.hopechest.us) or call 952-471-8700.*