Laini Fluellen Charities and Know Your Lemons: Squeezing Out Breast Cancer and Winning the Fight

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INTRODUCTION

Each minute, a woman dies from breast cancer somewhere in the world (Avon Products, 2018). The first and most important tool a woman needs to win a fight against this disease is the education to identify breast cancer symptoms as early as possible (“Know Your Lemons,” 2020). Laini Fluellen Charities, Inc. (LFC) is an organization dedicated to aiding women in the fight against triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), a highly aggressive form of breast cancer that characteristically affects young women, has fewer treatment options, and results in lower survival rates overall (“Susan G. Komen: TNBC,” 2020). Laini Fluellen Charities combats TNBC by representing those most disproportionally affected: young African American and Hispanic women. LCF leads the fight by promoting awareness through education and funding further research for a cure (“LFC,” 2019).

TNBC is two times as likely to be found in African American women, which also contributes greatly to survival disparities (Imperative, 2019). Similarly, nearly 40% of African American and Hispanic women diagnosed with breast cancer are diagnosed with TNBC, in comparison to 15% of women from other ethnic groups (“LFC,” 2019). Most startlingly, African American women have a 42% higher rate of death from breast cancer than women in other ethnic groups (Wolfe et al., 2017). This makes the already impossible statistics cited above even more dire, and still all of the difficulties faced by women vulnerable to TNBC have not been illustrated. LFC works tirelessly to aid all women in combating TNBC, and places a special focus on improving health outcomes for Hispanic and African American women and working against racial disproportions (“LFC,” 2019).

For my fall 2020 4800 Internships in Writing Course, I was paired with Laini Fluellen Charities. By working together, we were able to help others overcome the fear associated with breast cancer, and teach in impactful ways completely inclusive of gender, age, ethnicity, and background. Prior to this project, I had previous experience writing grants with Purdue University Northwest. I had also taken courses in online marketing and digital media, and worked with nonprofit organizations such as the Independent Cat Society. All of these experiences...
Even with her prognosis, Laini maintained a hopeful and positive outlook. She spent most of her time doing what she liked to do most: helping others. Laini had nine godchildren, three mentees, and a host of family and friends to care for. She had always been caring and loved young people in general, but Laini was especially drawn to young girls that needed spiritual, social, and emotional guidance to be encouraged to excel in their goals. She mentored many by attending their sporting events and providing tutoring, counseling, and special outings (Artis, 2019).

Even though she never had children of her own, on Mother’s Day in 2009, Laini was honored as “Mother of the Year” by her Valley Kingdom Ministries International church because of her continued involvement with the youth in her community. With faith, strength, and perseverance, Laini lived nearly three years longer than the doctors predicted. She made every moment of her time count by spreading the word about TNBC through TV and book interviews; and she even took the opportunity to witness President Obama’s inauguration. Laini demonstrated love for all life through her work in caring for others, and Laini Fluellen Charities, Inc. was created to continue the work and her legacy (Artis, 2019).

LFC’s Mission

Laini Fluellen Charities has been raising funds to further research facts about TNBC and develop more treatment options for this type of breast cancer. Since 2009, LFC has been providing spiritual and educational support through seminars, awareness campaigns, and website resources, and facilitating care coordination and navigation services for women at high risk for developing breast cancer; directly serving northwest Indiana and our Purdue University Northwest community (“LFC,” 2019). LFC works tirelessly to aid all women in combating TNBC, and places a special focus on improving health outcomes for Hispanic and African American women and working against racial disproportions (“LFC,” 2019). Our work together has helped further their work in aiding research, put on their first virtual TNBC awareness fundraiser gala, and begin working with Know Your Lemons (KYL), a global breast health network offering resources for a cure.

Corrine Ellsworth Beaumont, PhD, a lecturer in design thinking and entrepreneurship at Kingston University in London, created the KYL breast cancer education campaign after she lost several women in her family to breast cancer and realized there were not many resources available to women fighting the disease. Corrine wanted

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**DESCRIPTION**

**LFC’s Inspiration**

Laini Fluellen Charities was inspired by TNBC warrior Laini Fluellen. In January 2006, Laini first noticed a lump in her breast at age 35. She ignored the warning signs at first; she assumed the lump was just “a benign cyst like her mother occasionally had,” and was reluctant to seek a medical opinion because she did not have health care insurance at the time and did not want to incur any “unnecessary” expenses. When Laini started a new job (which provided health care insurance) a few months later, the small lump on her breast had tripled in size. A biopsy then confirmed the worst news: the small lump that she noticed several months before was a malignant tumor. The pain in her armpit indicated that the breast cancer had already spread to her lymph nodes and other parts of her body (Artis, 2020). Laini rarely received positive news during her three-year battle with cancer due to the fact that there are few treatment options for triple-negative breast cancer.
LAINI FLUELLEN CHARITIES AND KNOW YOUR LEMONS

Figure 2. LFC contributes funding for a cure.

to make materials that work through barriers of literacy, fear, and taboo that surround the fight against breast cancer accessible to women all over the world (“Know Your Lemons,” 2020). LFC has identified providing equal access to breast health education as paramount in winning the fight against TNBC, thus working with Know Your Lemons was a goal for their organization for some time.

Only 2% of women can identify all of the signs of breast cancer. Only 2 in 5 women feel confident about recognizing changes in their breasts that could be signs of breast cancer; 25% of women feel that a lump is the only sign, when in truth there are 12 different signs that can aid in early detection (Avon Products, 2018; “Know your Lemons,” 2020). Based on the demographic affected by TNBC, it is vital to expand LFC’s education campaigns to young, college-age women. Knowledge about the 12 signs or the choice to get an early mammogram could mean saving the life of a Hispanic or African American student (or a family member) just about to complete her degree in engineering. It is hard to win the battle against breast cancer if you do not even know you are fighting, especially if your opponent has three times the armor.

Initiatives

Laini Fluellen Charities regularly generates service and project opportunities for the public. In addition to volunteer opportunities, LFC regularly offers two internships for students. The first is a social media internship that allows students to generate and manage social media and blog posts. The second is a fundraising internship where students work to solicit corporate and community sponsors for LFC’s annual Pink Tie Affair. The Pink Tie Affair is a fundraiser gala usually held at Ameristar Casino Hotel in East Chicago, Indiana, each fall. At the event, medical practitioners are recognized for their work with TNBC research and breast cancer treatment. Breast cancer survivors are also celebrated. They are given a platform to share their stories and encourage others going through struggle themselves. The event sees 250+ attendees on average, and they are able to take photos on the pink carpet; enjoy dinner, music, and dancing; and participate in live and silent auctions (“LFC,” 2019). Past keynote speakers have included Dr. Jackie Walters, Summer Jackson, and Darlene Hill (“LCF,” 2019).

To make an even bigger impact in fighting breast cancer with increased education, I worked with LFC to write grants to provide the funding to certify as many of their organization members as possible as “Lemonistas,” a growing global movement of breast health educators who have completed the Know Your Lemons Global Educator Certification. Becoming global educators enables them to help others identify the warning signs of breast cancer and join the growing force of more than 113 Lemonistas across the globe. The grant earned meant that Purdue University facilitated the first complete certification in the state of Indiana and is, by extension, connected globally to breast health organizations around the world. Now, Laini Fluellen Charities has taken an even stronger place in Know Your Lemons’ global mission to change how the world looks at breast cancer, and is better equipped with the tools to give the communities we are serving directly hope and the knowledge to win the fight. In many ways, Know Your Lemons’ certification empowers both the educators and the students. LFC Lemonistas all have access to a global network platform to share and compare data from all over the world and connect with thousands of organizations spanning the globe (“KYL,” 2020).

In addition to writing grants for Know Your Lemons materials, I was also able to help Laini Fluellen Charities prepare for, participate in, or put on the following events:

- 3rd Annual PNW S.T.A.R. Walk, September 11, 2020
- 10th Annual Pink Tie Affair Fundraiser and Awareness Gala (virtual), October 24, 2020
- Virtual Know Your Lemons presentations for PNW, fall and spring semesters 2020–2021
- Purdue University Northwest Racism and Anti-Racism Speaker Series, February 4, 2021 (in correlation with World Cancer Day)
heroes in our lives, Ms. Artis told Laini Fluellen’s story, and we promoted LFC’s mission and collected donations throughout the night.

After the S.T.A.R. Walk and in the midst of writing grants for the organization, I also helped LFC by assisting with the preparation for their first virtual Pink Tie Affair. I reached out to sponsors and advised on the speeches for the event while creating a comprehensive grant and sponsorship opportunity spreadsheet.

I wrote social media samples and blog posts, updated organization members' biographies, formed interview questions for ACCESS Health Center CEO Donna Thompson, and wrote an article about Thompson’s work with ACCESS and LFC. Aside from my work during the S.T.A.R. Walk, I was able to complete all of my work in a virtual setting, with an emphasis on Zoom, Microsoft Office, and Google Spreadsheet platforms. While Laini Fluellen Charities offers volunteer, social media, and fundraising internship opportunities on a regular basis, my experience was a hybrid of all three, and the S.H.I.N.E. and S.T.A.R. Walk collaborations were unique to my experience overall.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Project Success

The success of the project cumulatively was measured in many ways. The first was by the increased social media

Figure 3. Pink Tie Affair flyers at the 2020 S.T.A.R. Walk.
LAINI FLUELEN CHARITIES AND KNOW YOUR LEMONS

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activity of LFC, and the increased likes and shares of the organization’s content that resulted. Laini Fluellen Charities was also able to launch a newly designed website during this time, which then became more accessible to sponsors. LFC also saw an increase in the sponsors and donations for the virtual Pink Tie Affair. The organization raised just under $25,000 for the cause and found the virtual platform could be a benefit instead of a setback, because of the opportunity to reach a global audience versus a community one.

Because of the success of the virtual Pink Tie Affair, LFC is able to further its mission of “improving outcomes for young women at high risk for triple-negative breast cancer diagnosis in the Northwest Indiana and Chicagoland area.” The funds raised are being put toward TNBC research, mammograms for the community, awareness campaigns, and early detection and breast health education events.

Looking more in-depth as to how these funds will benefit the community, funds put toward TNBC research allow LFC to build relationships with local hospitals and, in turn, raise awareness among medical professionals about the latest TNBC treatments. LFC funds TNBC treatment research studies and clinical trials; five entirely new research studies were made available in local hospitals because of LFC’s efforts (Artis, 2020; “LCF,” 2019).

LFC’s funds also allow subsidized mammograms for those who are uninsured or underinsured. Early detection is a key factor in a TNBC patient’s chances of survival, and some insurance plans don’t cover mammograms for women under age 40. Regularly, screening mammograms can cost up to $350 and diagnostic mammograms up to $500 (Artis, 2020; “LCF,” 2019).

Lastly, in addition to the Know Your Lemons breast health education program LFC is now offering, Laini Fluellen Charities is using grant and donor funding from the Pink Tie Affair to continue the Beth’s Bags care package program. This program distributes about 400 care packages to patients at three local hospitals:

Figure 5. One of LFC’s in-person Pink Tie Affair galas.
The care packages include medical planners and journals to help breast cancer patients navigate their treatment process. The program was inspired by Beth Brantley Paschal, who put together a collection of items to support a friend who was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer. That same year, Beth herself was also diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer. LFC wanted to honor Beth’s dedication by reminding women going through TNBC that they are not alone (Artis, 2020; “LCF,” 2019).

**Internship Preparedness**

Since LFC regularly welcomes student interns and volunteers, the organization was well prepared to work with me, support this project, and in turn experience a smooth and successful process. They prepared Google spreadsheets and documents so that I could quickly understand the organization’s initiatives, and we could share work and communicate frequently despite being mainly remote. The biggest challenge faced later in the semester was the fact that all interaction had to be virtual, and we were not able to engage in person for interviews, sponsorship, or any other work after the S.T.A.R. Walk. I feel that we would have been able to raise even more funding for the organization if we had been able to make those face-to-face connections.

Now that my internship class has concluded, Laini Fluellen Charities will still be able to keep their initiatives going with the help of new interns and continued volunteers. The LFC and S.H.I.N.E. partnership still remains, however. S.H.I.N.E. will continue to invite LFC to Purdue University Northwest for Know Your Lemons presentations and TNBC awareness events. This will ensure that LFC is always connected to the PNW community and reaching as much of the population in need as possible.

**STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT**

There were several moments throughout this partnership when the magnitude and importance of the impact of the work I was getting to be a part of really hit me. One of the first times was at the S.T.A.R. Walk. When I finished my opening speech and welcomed Ms. Artis on stage, I had a moment to look out at the lawn where participants had gathered to listen, socially distanced. Ms. Artis smiled widely as she took the mic, and I was filled with pride at the power of community. Just like Laini’s legacy, I could see here that impact starts with a need, the work or idea of someone to fill that need, and then the action of many working as one.

The second moment that I was hit with a powerful realization about this work was when I had the opportunity to be a part of a Zoom interview with Dr. Karen Bishop Morris, the incredible professor who connected me to LFC with this internship class, Tranece Artis, my remarkable LFC supervisor, Trish Buckingham, and Angie Hernandez, a TNBC survivor. It was here that I was taken aback and beyond inspired by the strength of the women role models before me. I came to this internship with the necessary writing skills to do beneficial work for the organization, but the mentorship, training, and experiences I had helped me completely expand my skill set and outlook.

Though I had to conduct most of my work virtually, I was able to adapt to new mediums and surprisingly schedule more without having to account for travel time, which resulted in more productivity. For these reasons, I consider this another advantage instead of a setback. I would not change a thing about the entire project, and look forward to continuing to work with LFC through S.H.I.N.E.

This semester, I was blessed to be able to work with two nonprofits concurrently, Laini Fluellen Charities and the
I would highly recommend getting involved with LFC in any way that you can. Not only is the cause extremely important, but the experience will also teach you to make your place in the world the most meaningful that it can be. As a young woman myself, throughout my internship, I found myself being more cognizant of my breast health and learning along with the KYL material. I was also able to pass on this knowledge to my sister, mother, aunt, grandmother, and friends. This is exactly what LFC's program is designed to do.

Similarly, as I worked with the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court, an organization that aids veterans suffering from homelessness, substance abuse, PTSD, and more, I found myself being more mindful of the stabilities I was blessed to have in my life so that I could better help those who might not have the same luxuries. In other words, what I hope that readers take away from my article is the following. I hope they finish the reading with a new understanding about the immensely impactful mission of LFC, I hope they take with them new inspiration to challenge themselves to make a difference in the breast health community and in any other ways...
that they can, and finally, I hope they now know completing a service-learning project with the incredible organizations that make up our community has the power to open their eyes in invaluable ways that can expand their professional potential and change the world.

REFERENCES


Artis, Tranece (Laini Fluellen Charities executive director), in discussion with the author, November 2020.


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all of the amazing women in my life: my mother Christine, sister Kaitlyn, Aunt Michelle, and Grandma Veronica. To Dr. Karen Bishop Morris and Tranece Artis for both making this internship a possibility and offering endless guidance, mentorship, and support. To the entire Laini Fluellen Charities and Know Your Lemons teams for the incredible work they do for our world, and to the remarkable Laini Fluellen for inspiring us all.