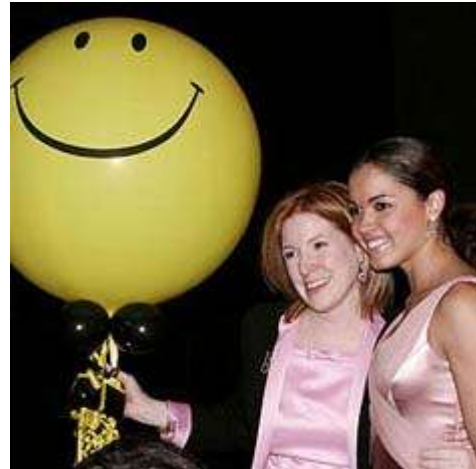


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Saranne Rothberg (left) with Miss USA Susie Castillo at the Garland Appeal Gala at Christie's Auction House, October 2003. Photo by Rob Rich.

Deborah Beaulieu has been a contributing editor at Redbook Magazine, House Beautiful, and Victoria Magazine where she was the Editorial Director for over ten years. Today she is a freelance writer and lives with her husband in Westchester, New York.

giving back

The Gift of Laughter by Deborah Beaulieu

April is National Humor Month, time to blow a party horn, wear a funny hat, and give three cheers to the ComedyCures Foundation, a New Jersey-based non-profit with a unique mission: to bring joy, laughter, and therapeutic humor programs to kids and adults living with illness, depression, and trauma. And it all began with one diagnosis, one mom, and one daughter. Each one faced the uncertainty of illness (as patient, as loved one) with humor and gave the world a new way to cope with life's speed bumps.

In 1999, single mother Saranne Rothberg was hit with a heart-stopping diagnosis: breast cancer at an advanced stage. Only 37 and with a young daughter to raise, she pulled herself up, brushed away the tears, and made a pact with young Lauriel: they would laugh together 100 times a day, finding joy and purpose in every step of Saranne's journey. Inspired by Norman Cousins' laughter-as-healer philosophy, Saranne threw a "comedy chemo party" during her first treatment; friends and family joined her in watching stand-up comedy videos. "We were redefining the look, feel, smell, and taste of the chemo room," she says. "We focused on the joy of life, finding humor in the experience versus the negativity."

And in between the laughter, Saranne started something wonderful. From that chemo chair she felt a calling, putting her laptop and cell phone to work helping others. "God put me on earth to help patients and redefine what it means to be a patient," she explains. But how was this little grass roots concept

able to reach millions? "I attribute it to the fact that the need is so great--people are thirsting for smiles and for laughter."

From the start, help came from all directions. "Everything we ever needed was offered to us." A local law firm helped create the non-profit organization, while another did the taxes; another company donated all the printing, a local realtor gave her free office space for a year. "A student from Mexico heard about our mission and created our logo as a gift. I've never even met him!" It was meant to be. "Everything I'd done in my life suddenly made sense," she says. "That's why this has all moved ahead so fast."

Their comedy programs have graced the halls of Gilda's Clubs and community centers, and the ComedyCures "laughline" has been accessed by nearly 20,000 people in the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

Young Lauriel, now age 11, is still Saranne's comic muse. They start the day with prayers of gratitude--and a joke. What has Lauriel gained from the experience? "She knows illness is a call to serve--you help people." Now cancer-free, Saranne's pace hasn't faltered. "I try to give people things to put into their bag of tricks -- prayer, meditation, imaging, yoga, nutrition," she says. "Some days you need all the tricks, sometimes only one." And comedy is what recharges her. "It helps me maintain hope, focus, breath, vitality." Her advice: give yourself the gift of comedy and laughter every day. "That's what makes the roller coaster of illness more like cross country skiing -- no moguls!"

For more, visit
<http://www.comedycures.org/>.