Pretty pick-me-ups

OSU student group sends care packages to encourage female cancer patients

By Jennifer Smola

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Fighting Pretty OSU members Kira Bulger, left, Olivia Szpak, center, and Carolin Augustini, hand only, join others Wednesday at the Ohio Union in packing miniature boxing gloves into “pretty packages” that go to women with cancer. The student group hopes to encourage the women in their fight and to remind them of their strength and beauty. [ERIC ALBRECHT/DISPATCH]
Marissa Patrick, left, and Erika Petersen concentrate on getting the addresses right on some packages. [ERIC ALBRECHT/DISPATCH PHOTOS]

When Ohio State University junior Hannah Laubach’s mother was diagnosed with breast cancer this summer, she started paying more attention to student organizations on campus that focused on the disease.

She found herself drawn to one in particular.

It wasn’t about research or funding or finding a cure for
the disease that plagues so many.

“A lot of the other organizations that are surrounding cancer are more for raising money for research or raising money for hospitals,” said Laubach, an English major from Stow in northeast Ohio. Those efforts are important, she said, but “there’s nothing that’s really designed for people who already have cancer.”

Enter Fighting Pretty, an organization focused on lifting the spirits of women fighting cancer. Through “pretty packages” sent to female cancer patients, the group aims to remind women of their beauty and strength.

“It sucks to have cancer, so a little pick-me-up kind of thing is nice,” Laubach said last week as she and others in the student group assembled packages at the Ohio Union.

Each package has both beauty and comfort items: lipstick, colorful socks, vibrant scarves, inspirational magnets and notepads, for example. The Ohio State group also tries to include local items, like custom “Fighter” cuff bracelets donated this fall by the Columbus-based Red Giraffe Designs jewelry store.

“It’s nice to be able to give a small little gift that’s a reminder that you are beautiful,” said Ripal Patel, a senior from Powell who is co-president of Fighting Pretty OSU. “You don’t need these products, but this is just another reminder that you are strong and fighting.”

The Ohio State organization, started in 2016, was the first group of student ambassadors to the national Fighting Pretty nonprofit organization, which sends 7,000 care packages a year to people in all 50 states and nearly a dozen countries.

Each box has a personalized card and message of support for each woman recipient.

But the crowning jewel of each pretty package? A mini pair of hot pink boxing gloves.

Those boxing gloves were Stephanie Riedmiller’s favorite part when she was on the receiving end of a pretty package earlier this year after her second battle with breast cancer.

She had just finished nearly six months of chemotherapy and radiation and had started oral therapy, Riedmiller recalled, when she received the care package. In her case, it was hand-delivered by the daughter of a co-worker, Marissa Patrick, who is a member of the Ohio State chapter.

“I was pretty much down in the dumps and feeling really bad about my looks and general overall appearance,” said Riedmiller, 55, of Westerville. “I remember opening up the box and there were just so many items in there, personal items that would mean something to a woman."

Now in remission, Riedmiller continues to hang her little pink gloves from her rear-view mirror as a reminder.

“I see them and they’re a constant reminder that I am a fighter, I am a warrior, and I have won this battle and I’m going to win the war,” she said.

The national Fighting Pretty nonprofit group was started in 2013 by Kara Skaflestad, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 26.

“If you think about all the other people who have cancer today and are getting diagnosed tomorrow and the next day and the next day, all of those women need to be reminded that they’re strong and beautiful,”
Skafestad said.

The Ohio State Fighting Pretty group fundraises throughout the year to be able to assemble and send packages once each semester. The group orders many of the items through the national nonprofit, but some other items are donated. Their goal for this school year is to send 100 packages, 50 packages per semester, but after the 62 packages they assembled last week, they’re on track to exceed it.

“A lot of the girls in the organization have a close family connection (to cancer),” said Brandy Shook, a senior from Dayton and the other co-president of the Ohio State group. “It’s great for them to be able to do something to help other people because they’ve experienced it in their family.”

To nominate a woman to receive a pretty package through the Ohio State Fighting Pretty organization, visit tinyurl.com/prettypackages1819. jsmola@dispatch.com @jennsmola