

# Online sisters get together

## Breast cancer spurred Internet connection

By Annik Stahl  
Special to The Denver Post

"Madame Zonga" invited the group of eight breast cancer survivors to take a peek at her substantial cleavage. After the "ooohs" and "ahs" subsided, she explained why it meant so much that she even had one.

"I had a bilateral mastectomy last November and boy, I had an amazing reconstruction," said Zonga, a member of Breast Cancer Forum, an online support group in the form of a "chat room."

Zonga, of Maryland, and 65 other breast cancer survivors have been meeting regularly online to discuss their disease, its treatments and the effects breast cancer has had on their lives and the lives of their friends and family. Several of them gathered in Denver this weekend to meet each other face-to-face for the first time.

"This has been the best experience," said Lynn Burke, of Lakewood. "It has exceeded all my expectations."

Susan Frisius, of Massachusetts, began the support group last December when she realized there was nothing like it for an online venue. There were several live chat rooms on the Internet designated for people with breast cancer, but Frisius said she had spent 50 hours just waiting in a room for someone to show up.

"I finally went to all the places relating to breast cancer online I could find and posted a message announcing the beginning of Breast Cancer Forum," said Frisius, smiling. "I wanted to get out the idea that you're not going to just die if you have breast cancer. You're still alive and you're still a person."

Many of the members had belonged to listserves, electronic bulletin boards that allow users to exchange information via the Internet. Users of these types of message boards can receive 100 messages a day.

"There's no humor on the listserves," Burke said. "Once I found out about this chat room, I never went back. There's no comparison."



The Denver Post / Dave Buresh

Lynn Burke (left) of Lakewood and Nellaine Price of Maryland chat during a meeting in Lakewood of breast cancer survivors who met on the Internet.

Burke and the other women acknowledged that someone going through chemotherapy often does not have the energy to search out a traditional support group even though they said it has been documented that people who use support groups live five years longer than those who don't.

"Sometimes when you're going through chemo, you can't get dressed," Burke said. "This is a way for people to get together."

Frisius agreed. "When I had breast cancer, I was too tired to go to a support group," she said. She also said not everything the members talk about has to do with cancer. "It's about a third humor, a third cancer talk, and the rest having to do with our friends and family," she said. "We even make top 10 lists like 'why it's great to be bald' and 'other uses for your prosthesis.'"

All the women (there are no male survivors in the group yet) agreed that the Breast Cancer Forum has helped them tremendously.

"It was rough after surgery to go anywhere or do anything. These people pulled me through chemotherapy," Zonga said. "I never would have survived it without them."

Dee Degnan, of Texas, said: "It's been great to know that I'm not the only one who reacts this way. We've got that common ground."

As Madame Zonga ran her hand through her short, dark hair and proudly pushed her chest out for all who cared to look, Burke smiled at her and said, "Every cloud has a silver lining."

The Breast Cancer Forum meets every Sunday, Wednesday and Friday at 6 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time at: <http://www.lifetimetv.com/chat>.