

FOUNDATION OF FRIENDSHIP

A career change and a cancer diagnosis brought these two local women even closer

BY MISSY GOOD
The Wichita Eagle

Friendships are among life's greatest gifts — and sometimes you don't realize how important they are until life deals you a devastating surprise.

Just ask LeeAnn Callahan and Gisele McMinimy.

The two women quickly developed a friendship nearly 16 years ago when LeeAnn started cutting Gisele's hair.

They were comfortable with each other right off the bat, and found that they could tell each other anything.

Even after LeeAnn, 46, decided to quit styling hair to open a wig business, the two remained close.

So when Gisele, 42, was diagnosed with breast cancer and called to schedule a consultation at The Wig Lady, LeeAnn's business at 13th and West Street, LeeAnn told her friend she'd take care of her — and added something she doesn't normally say to her clients.

"I'm so sorry."

New beginning

When LeeAnn went wig shopping with a friend who had a recurrence of cancer a little more than six years ago, she immediately recognized a great need.

"It was a devastating experience for her," LeeAnn said. "There was a lack of privacy, a lack of selection, a lack of cleanliness and a lack of honesty."

Inspiration struck.

LeeAnn wrote a letter to her clients — including Gisele — to tell them that she would no longer be able to do their hair.

Then she set out to build her business, which provides fitting and styling services to women dealing with hair loss due to chemotherapy and other treatments and illnesses.

Even though the change was financially challenging, LeeAnn said she never doubted that she was doing the right thing.

"It was a matter of how to get there," she said. "I thrive on trying to be the best I can be and serving the needs of others."

With help from Victory in the Valley, a local volunteer support group for cancer patients, word of mouth spread about The Wig Lady,



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Gisele McMinimy, left, is wearing a wig that LeeAnn Callahan, owner of The Wig Lady, fit and styled for her. The two have been friends for nearly 16 years.

and the business took off.

As fate would have it, a good friend and former client would benefit from LeeAnn's determination.

Accepting the gifts

Gisele says the scariest part of breast cancer was how fast everything happened.

"The first two months were very scary," she said. "I had to make a lot of big decisions very quickly."

She was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer — which means the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes — in May 2005, had a mastectomy in June, then started a series of eight chemotherapy treatments in August.

She didn't want anyone to know at first, and she constantly worried about what the future would bring.

"Then I thought, I can sit here and worry about this, but it's just going to make me feel worse," she said.

"I decided that I'd just worry when it looked like I wasn't going to be OK, and I put it all in God's hands."

Before starting chemotherapy treatments, which would eventually lead to the loss of her hair, Gisele called LeeAnn to schedule a consultation

"I knew I needed hair," she said. "I needed the normalcy that hair would provide, because I didn't want to be the center of attention."

Gisele said she also knew that LeeAnn was dedicated to providing privacy to her clients — and was comforted by the fact that her friend would take good care of her.

Gisele decided to donate her hair to Locks of Love, then to shave the rest of her hair so the wig would fit more comfortably.

On the morning of her wig fitting (toward the end of her first round of treatment), Gisele lost enough hair to fill a large bowl.

She went to her appointment prepared to cry as LeeAnn shaved her head, but the two friends got through the experience together amid laughter and tears.

And once the wig was fitted and styled — nearly identical to the way her hair had been styled before — the transformation was more than

Gisele expected.

"We were so excited after LeeAnn styled it," she said. "It looked very natural."

So natural, in fact, that Gisele's doctor did a double take when she came in for her next appointment.

He wasn't sure that her chemotherapy treatment had been strong enough.

"I've had so many people tell me that if they didn't know, they never would have guessed that it was a wig," Gisele said.

Looking back on the past several months, Gisele says she can't believe how much support she's received — and how much it's

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GISELE MCMINIMY

lifted her up.

"You have to accept cancer and let people help you, because they're dealing with it, too," she said. "And you have to be open to the gifts cancer gives you."

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