

# I'M A SURVIVOR!

## BOSOM BUDDIES

**Who:** Serena Wee, 33; Irene Chan, 32; and Yvonne Chong, 33. All three are founding partners of Can-Care, a company that provides cancer care products to cancer patients and their families.

## No Mountain Too High

With cancer as the leading cause of death in Singapore, and with breast cancer affecting 40 per 100,000 women, chances are you'd know a close friend or relative who's had to face the disease.

As friends and former colleagues in a healthcare firm, Serena, Irene and Yvonne found themselves discussing the difficulties their in-laws, cousins, aunts and grandparents faced when diagnosed with cancer.

"Aside from dealing with the illness, they've got to face up to their mortality and unpleasant side effects of chemotherapy. Women especially are faced with self-esteem issues because they lose a breast, their hair, and even their independence when their families and doctors take over and start making decisions for them," says Serena.

## Hope Floats

It was in 1997 that the three left their full-time jobs, took a 40 per cent pay cut and pooled together their life savings which amounted to \$250,000, to start up Can-Care with the tagline "Why should life be any different?"

To support their manifesto, the shop sells mastectomy bras ("we source the pretty ones in coloured lace, not those that look like they were from the '50s"), swimwear (even bikinis), medical grade wigs ("unlike costume wigs, these are lighter, cooler and more comfortable"), gentle shampoos for hair weakened by chemotherapy. In addition, Can-Care also provides free counselling services for patients, their spouses and their relatives by their in-house registered nurse.

"It's great when patients are able to get their lives back to normal," says Irene, who also helped establish "Look Good, Feel Better" workshops in Singapore in conjunction with makeup giant Estee Lauder. The free workshops, held at Singapore General Hospital, National Cancer Centre and National University Hospital, teach women patients how to apply



From left to right: Serena, Irene and Yvonne

**"SO MANY OF US TAKE THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE TOO SERIOUSLY WHEN WE SHOULD APPRECIATE LIFE MORE JUST THE WAY IT IS."**

makeup and put on wigs correctly.

In addition, they've also launched the Singapore Wig Bank, which collects used wigs for donating to needy cancer patients.

## Words Of Wisdom

"What I've learned from our clients is strength. Instead of giving in to despair, a lot of clients change their lives for the better. Human nature is such that some people need drastic wakeup calls ... I'm reminded every day that it's a gift just to be alive," says Irene.

Serena agrees: "So many of us take the little things in life too seriously when we should appreciate life more just the way it is."

As for Yvonne, whose brother-in-law died of cancer at the age of 35, six months after being diagnosed with lung cancer, the most important thing one can do for someone with cancer, is to "listen. Don't smother, don't force the person to talk about it if she's not ready. Involve her in the decision-making process."

# the shop that sells HOPE

By Ming Rodrigues

**F**rom the outside, it looks like a beauty salon with its wide glass window-front, subtle wood interior and cosy seating. But step inside and you immediately sense a store with a difference. On the shelves up front, there are hats that cover the whole head, and swimsuits with slits in the bust lining so falsies can be inserted. Walk through to the back, and you're met with wigs, full-cup lacy bras, and realistic foam and silicone breast prostheses.

A first in Asia, Can-Care, is a shop dedicated to products and services for women who have survived cancer. It is run by Irene Chan and Yvonne Chong who were formally in the medical profession. The partners, both in their twenties, say Singaporean women have needed a place like Can-Care for years.

Explains Irene, "Until now, post-cancer patients were left on their own to find where to buy after-care products – such as swimsuits that are high cut to cover surgery scars. But most women had no idea where to go – or even what was available."

It might seem silly to worry about buying a lacy bra after breast cancer, but studies worldwide have found cancer patients who have a positive attitude recover faster after treatment. These people are also more likely to stay healthy.

"These are not vanity products as some people might think," says Irene. "A lot of self-esteem is lost while people

struggle to come to terms with cancer. Nice products are a way of making them feel better and more positive."

So bras here are as pretty and lacy as regular brassieres. Caps and headbands come in attractive colours and fabrics. Irene explains, "Chemotherapy – a cancer treatment using strong chemicals – can cause hair to fall out. Caps help you feel less self-conscious."

Visitors can also browse through literature or borrow videos for free on coping with the disease (Mandarin versions will be available here soon).

There's even a room where customers can seek counselling from a trained nurse – and try on merchandise in private.

Men are not forgotten either; there are products for survivors of colorectal cancer, the most common cancer among Singaporean men.

In fact, cancer is the number one cause of death in Singapore. In 1995, 25.1 per cent of all deaths were from cancer, with breast cancer being the most common one in women. Around the world, it is second only to lung cancer as a killer of women.

But scary statistics are not what Can-Care is about. Instead, it focuses on helping people feel better. "We could have easily opened in a hospital but we opened in a shopping centre instead. We wanted to encourage people to shop in a normal environment," says Yvonne.

The duo aims to get involved in community service projects to educate the

WHERE'S  
YOUR  
PINK  
RIBBON?

## Breast Cancer Awareness Month

OCTOBER is Breast Cancer Awareness Month worldwide. Last year, Estee Lauder Companies, Inc, headed a global campaign to raise awareness of breast cancer. Four million pink ribbons (the symbol for the fight against breast cancer) were given away free at thousands of Estee Lauder cosmetic counters in 37 countries. Three million information bookmarks with facts about cancer prevention and treatment were also handed out. This year you can get your pink ribbon and vital health information at Estee Lauder, Prescriptives, Clinique, Origins and Aramis counters (till end of October). It's a great way to show your support.

## How Feeling Better

"Laughter is the best medicine... if you can't find humour, you're going to wither up and dry," says Christine Clifford, 43, who's living proof that positive thinking can help fight cancer.



Christine: Thinking happy helped her beat cancer.

She's lived with cancer most of her life. Christine remembers watching her mother fall victim to deep depression after her diagnosis at the age of 42.

# boost a woman's mood – it can also keep her healthy

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Partners Irene Chan (left) and Yvonne Chong aim to help Singaporean women know the value of positive thinking.

Photography: Leslie Koh

public on cancer. Also on the cards is a make-up workshop, modelled after Estee Lauder's highly successful Look Good, Feel Better program in the United States. The scheme sees make-up artists giving makeovers to cancer patients all over the country.

Clearly, their message is one of hope. “Cancer is not necessarily fatal,” says Irene. “It is possible for patients to enjoy their lives as much as ever.”

Can-Care is at #03-14/15 Scotts Shopping Centre, Tel: 736 3168.

## Helped One Woman Get Better

“She stopped caring, she just crawled into bed and never came out. My father left. Death and tragedy, those were my images of cancer.”

But when cancer struck Christine at 40, she was determined not to take it lying down, despite her own fears and pain. Humour was her cure.

The result: *Not Now... I'm Having A No Hair Day*, a book of cartoons and stories she wrote about her experiences. Characters in her book include her husband John, her sons Tim and Brooks, the family dog,

friends and even strangers.

The former marketing executive tells her story like it is: Her collapse when the doctor gave her the test results; the fear of hearing her hair would fall out; and intimate details, like just before surgery, when she wistfully admired her figure in a low-cut dress.

But between the sober memories are the comic nuggets. Like the time Christine wore a rabbit cap, a gift from her sons, and

exclaimed, “Oh, it's so me!” Or the time her son had this to say about her chemotherapy, “Cool! Will you look like Captain Jean Luc Picard on *Star Trek*?”

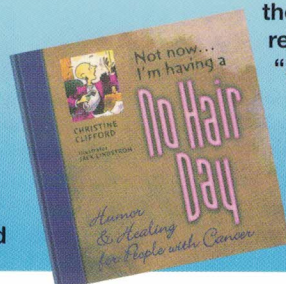
Ironically, cancer has since changed her life for the better. “I was a workaholic. Cancer forced me to stop and smell the roses,” she reveals. “I'm living life

more fully than I ever did!”

Out soon is her new book of stories and cartoons for kids, titled *Our Family Has Cancer Too*.

Christine's first book is available at Can-Care. So too is the exercise video she put together for women who are recovering from the disease.

Christine applauds the opening of Can-Care as “a brave and necessary move”. She adds, “Cancer is a very difficult thing to discuss. But it is important to talk about it. Being open, and showing love and support can really help.”



Laughter can heal: Christine's book shares her tears – and her giggles.