Cancer Support Community (Formerly The Wellness Community) was established in 1982 in Santa Monica, California by Dr. Harold and Harriet Benjamin. Upon Harriet being diagnosed with cancer and experiencing the lack of resources and emotional support available to them and their family, Dr. Benjamin left his successful law practice, supporting Hollywood movie stars, to pursue a medical degree and learn how he can provide the gold standard of psychosocial oncology support to anyone impacted by cancer. Armed with education, and the passion that there’s a strong correlation between emotional and physical well-being, the Benjamin’s transformed the way our culture faces cancer and created an organization that provides free social and emotional support to cancer patients and caregivers. At the heart of Cancer Support Community are their free programs which reflect the five elements that make up their complimentary approach to the cancer journey: emotional support, health & nutrition, education, social gatherings and engagements, and resources & referrals to bring awareness of community resources to you and your caregiver(s) any cancer, at any stage, and any age. Following years of success and bringing hope, love and support to California, Cancer Support Community expanded to Arizona, opening its doors in Phoenix in 1999, and 36-years later, there are 170 affiliates nationally and internationally, including Canada, Israel and Japan. In 2009, Cancer Support Community merged with the Gilda’s Club Worldwide, as a result Cancer Support Community is now the largest provider of cancer support worldwide.

Cancer Support Community Arizona’s campus is in the historic Ocotillo neighborhood and housed in the notable 110-year-old green Ina Levine House, surround by midtown Phoenix’s iconic palm trees. The campus provides an experience of healing and support that includes an oversized front porch to great and welcome guests, an extensive cancer resource library, a relaxation garden, multiple therapeutic group rooms for seminars, educational and expressive art activities, and an exercise & wellness room often used for yoga, Tai Chi and other stress reducing programs. While providing nearly 100 monthly free programs to reduce stress, enhance your immune system and create hope, daily programs include evidence-based, gold standard activities (art, cooking, education, support groups) aimed to improve quality of life or survivorship and is the only organization that provides emotional-social programs in Spanish in Arizona.

Debbie DiCarlo, Chief Executive Officer, Cancer Support Community Arizona, spoke with us about their work, mission, and partnership with ASU's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.

Please tell us about your personal background and how you came to be the Cancer Support Community Arizona Chief Executive Officer.

I have been in the non-profit world for a long time, much of which focused on justice initiatives, specifically poverty eradication, with Catholic Charities. I became extremely passionate about families who go about their days, as we all do, but are faced with many barriers to access to things some take for granted, such as high-quality education or healthcare. Four years ago, I took a two-year hiatus and moved to California to work for an insurance company doing innovative Community Resiliency Building. The premise behind that position is that stronger and healthier neighborhoods has shown to have a direct relationship with fewer insurance claims. For example, areas with meaningful afterschool programs for kids have less vandalism issues, which impacts insurance companies. While this was very innovative work, my family was here in Arizona. When this position at Cancer Support Community Arizona was available, I applied and returned to Arizona. I knew of Cancer Support Community Arizona because a very good friend attended programs here. It has been very gratifying because I had never worked in the cancer world but the underserved population and issues were the same as my prior work: make sure families with language, documentation, underinsured, and/or health literacy barriers understand and plug-in to the emotional-social world, because it has an impact on the medical world.

Tell us more about the Cancer Support Community Arizona mission and services.

Cancer Support Community Arizona partners directly with the medical community and we provide “always free,” comprehensive emotional social services. The “always free” is critical as cancer is one of the most expensive diseases to treat and 60% of our population are at or below poverty. This reality can emotionally and financial bankrupt an individual and family creating lifelong challenges and distress. This includes access to: 1) Emotional Support, which includes licensed counselors and social workers; 2) Health & Nutrition, which includes activities that reduce pain, stress/anxiety, and increase your immune system; 3) Education, including caregivers and the boarder community; and 4) Social Gathering & Engagements, including the social aspects to address unwanted isolation which occurs frequently with
cancer patients; and 5) Resources and Referrals to bringing awareness and access to additional needs during the cancer journey. Anytime we can professionally and comprehensively address our families’ emotional social needs, their quality of life and survivorship increase. Our mission includes anyone impacted by cancer, including caregivers, families, friends, co-workers, it's endless. With just under 1 out of 2 individuals diagnosed with cancer, this makes the caregiving pool much larger. Caregivers are part of our community and welcome, with or without a cancer patient or survivor. All are welcome to any of our cooking, education, group, and exercise classes for no charge. Our location provides a safe, non-clinical environment which allows people to truly open up and be vulnerable.

Cancer Support Community Arizona currently partners with CHPDP faculty member Dr. Linda Larkey and her breast cancer research. Can you explain this partnership and how it benefits both Cancer Support Community Arizona and CHPDP? How do you see our missions working together to address the needs of the communities we serve?

Dr. Linda Larkey has been on our Professional Advisory Board and she believes in our organization so strongly as a critical piece for families and individuals facing cancer. I met her shortly after joining Cancer Support Community Arizona and was quite fascinated to hear about the many different hats she wears in the local cancer community and how they have become quite integrated with our organization. Our most recent research partnership with Dr. Larkey's team focuses on how exercise and education effects breast cancer survivors' fatigue and emotional health. Some research sessions are held in our exercise and education rooms. The beauty of our partnership is there are women who may not qualify for the study but are directed to Cancer Support Community Arizona so they can immediately begin receiving services. This underserved population is a such a critical part of our community and it is a nice, mutually-beneficial partnership that brings light to both research and community resources. I see it as two wheels each of the same car moving forward. Partnerships like this are a win-win for our community and overall society. While Cancer Support Community Arizona's mission focuses anyone impacted by cancer, the work we both do is in the realm of a healthy lifestyle approach for underserved populations. Together we are trying to make more resilient, healthier communities.

What drives the passion for your work at Cancer Support Community Arizona?

When I first started, one commitment I made to the board was to dive deep and analyze what the next 20 years look like. We are accredited to serve Arizona and this space and property is beautiful and amazing. The environment itself gives you the feeling of safety while surrounded by high-quality, exceptional program delivery. My passion is to see how we take this and reach those with location (specifically rural), language, and access barriers. One current focus, working with your center, is reaching the west valley as it has the highest incidents of cancer diagnosis in the state. How do we make sure people have access to the same high-quality care there and make it sustainable? I am passionate about the mission but I am also passionate to try to make sure we are reaching enough people and have this conversation enough to replicate our work in areas that make sense for our state.

What goals do you see for Cancer Support Community Arizona in the coming years?

There is an overarching need for conversation around survivorship care plans. In 2018, survivorship care planning was 100% compliance mandated for all oncologists and is part of their treatment and follow-up plan. We have noticed a lack of literacy and patient empowerment to advocate for themselves. Plans are very individualized but some patients seem very foggy about moving forward. In good, solid survivorship care planning they would have been empowered and knowledgeable to ask important questions. I see this as an opportunity for us to deepen our partnership with ASU, as a research institution and program delivery organization, what might we do to address this gap. We also aim to become even more integrated and recognized as a key partner in our Latino communities.

For more information about Cancer Support Community Arizona, please visit www.cscaz.org