

Lauren Hixenbaugh (00:00):

Welcome to Living Beyond Cancer. I'm Lauren Hickson Ball, the manager for the WVU Cancer Institute's Mobile Cancer Screening program, and I'm your host for today's podcast episode for those who haven't joined us before with Living Beyond Cancer, it is a series of podcasts created for cancer patients, survivors, and their caregivers. Today I have with me a special co-host Lauren Wright, who is the director of the West Virginia Comprehensive Cancer Control Program.

Lauren Wright (00:28):

Everyone. As Lauren said, I'm the director [00:00:30] of the West Virginia Comprehensive Cancer Control Program and I'm also the facilitator of the Mounds of Hope Cancer Coalition and we are the program that through which Growing Hope started. We're

Lauren Hixenbaugh (00:41):

Really excited to have you and I also have two special guests with me today, Dr. Patrick Tomboc and Anita Graham. And we're all here to discuss Growing Hope, a program that is aimed at increasing the amount of fresh produce available to cancer patients facing food insecurities. I'm really pleased to have you all [00:01:00] with us, Dr. Tomboc. And Anita, if you would both just tell us a little bit about yourselves and your roles.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc (01:05):

My name is Dr. Patrick Tomboc. I am the Division Chief for the Pediatric Blood and Cancer Center here at WVU Medicine Children's Hospital. And I just trying to make it better for everyone and this program is amazing, so this is great.

Anita Graham (01:19):

Hi, I'm Anita Graham and I'm the social worker on the Pediatric Blood and Cancer Group, and so I help families with resources.

Lauren Hixenbaugh (01:29):

Well, [00:01:30] all of you have done some really incredible work and I was really excited to do this podcast. Growing Hope is one of my favorite programs that the coalition does, and I was fortunate enough to be there for the very beginning of it and have a background with the disability community and have also been a big part of Mountains Pope Cancer Coalition and was able to mush those two worlds with a local farm from my hometown [00:02:00] and with the coalition leadership. Now the project is really a major success, so I'm hoping that Lauren Wright can tell us a little bit more about how the program has developed.

Lauren Wright (02:10):

We began this program a few years ago. It just finished its third year and it is a fresh produce program that aims at reaching cancer patients and their families who are experiencing food insecurity. So we now have six cancer hospitals who are partnered with us on this program across the state, [00:02:30] and each of those hospitals has at least one farming partner within the state who provides this fresh produce. And about once or twice a week, those farmers bring that produce to the patients throughout the growing season. They bring 'em to the hospital and people like Anita and Dr. Tomboc, they make sure that the patients who need the produce receive the produce. So that's usually about a bag or box of

produce a week for about 10 or so weeks. So it's been a great program, really appreciate [00:03:00] the program. The farmers love being able to provide the produce and we receive nothing but positive feedback when we ask both clinicians and patients and the farmers about how their experiences with the program.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([03:15](#)):

So we take care of families and kids and the kids have cancer and they go through this whole process. So we're giving them chemotherapy. Their worlds are turned upside down whenever we give these diagnoses and [00:03:30] trying to get through this whole process is very hard, right? There are times where you're at the hospital till six or seven at night. There are times where you're not getting discharged till 8:00 PM kind of the time when my family gets together, when my family sees each other talks, we are a family is when we sit down to eat. And I think one of the harder things about the whole cancer processes, it very much throws chaos into [00:04:00] the normal daily lives of families. And I think growing Hope brings that back. It gives families the things they need to make a meal that they can have with their child, with the siblings, with the partner who didn't go to the appointment or wasn't admitted into the hospital with the patient.

([04:20](#)):

It allows them to sit down and be a family again. It provides some sense of normalcy in the chaos that [00:04:30] is treatment. And so I think if we can provide that and foster that in any way, which is exactly what Growing Hope does, it lowers the stress of the family. It gives them a way to connect with each other. Again, it gives them a way to sit down and slow down and eat together. I think that it's powerful, aside from the fact that they're just getting really good nutrition. I take care of kids who don't have strong immune systems who can't eat a lot, and the food that the nutrition they get in is so important, helping them build back their immune [00:05:00] systems, get calories in to grow again and get through the therapies that they're receiving. So I think Growing Hope just addresses so many needs for our patients and our families.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([05:11](#)):

It's wonderful. It's such an incredible program and I'm so glad you both have been champions of this. It has been wonderful. Anita, would you want to tell us about a unique experience you've had with the patients in growing home?

Anita Graham ([05:24](#)):

The partnership, we had two farmers actually, and the partnership that we've had with them [00:05:30] was very positive. One of the farmers actually came and did a cooking demonstration one day with the products that she was giving to our families. And I think the families really appreciated it because she used ingredients that most families would have on hand or were very simple to get. It was easy to provide that. And then [00:06:00] each week the farmers would give us information about the types of vegetables that we were going to receive. And so we put together some very simple recipes to hand out to families that I think was incredibly helpful to them. Families don't have a lot of time at the end of the day if they've been with us all day in clinic or if they get discharged from the hospital. So just having something very simple to be able to prepare [00:06:30] I think is really helpful. And to give them some ideas. We also provided a nutritional book that is provided by the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, and so we added that to the bags of groceries with families and I think that was helpful as well.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([06:52](#)):

That's great. I remember hearing a short story about somebody who had received a box and they had gotten an eggplant, [00:07:00] I think that was in the box, and they were like, I don't even know what to do with an eggplant. And so I know that was the conversation about the recipes and kind of the idea behind what do people do with this? So it's great they have these fresh produce, but now what do we do with them? Sometimes people just don't know. And I'm really glad that that has really evolved and we've figured out some new ways for people to use the materials in there. That's wonderful.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([07:30](#)):

[00:07:30] I've got four kids and it's more like whenever we're trying to get food together and I feel my wife is amazing and we always try and get food together for them, but planning that, I really learned that that is also a huge mental load. What are we going to make every day? What are we going to do to feed everyone? And so I think the recipes in the books, I think that is just another facet of how we're trying to help these families. We're just taking the load off, the mental load off, off whoever's going to be cooking, whoever's getting the food ready for their kids. [00:08:00] Just taking that little piece of mental workload, that little piece of decision making out of the process, I think that also really, really helps a lot.

Anita Graham ([08:08](#)):

Also, I think one of our families had said the patient is a young teen and he even was looking forward to getting the vegetables so that he could go home and he could create something new, and he was looking up recipes and things that he could do with the vegetables. [00:08:30] And sometimes just having that mental change away from being treated and have something normal to do is really a good mental health aid. So I can also see this as something that boosted mental health, not only with our patients but with our families as well.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([08:52](#)):

Lauren, I know you talked about the other that we have of this project. Did you want to talk about where those are in the state? And then [00:09:00] I like to talk about access to these types of services, maybe not the specific program, but these types of services and how people outside of WVU medicine and West Virginia can access services like this. So start with maybe that and then we can kind of lead into the different services that are available.

Lauren Wright ([09:19](#)):

Sure. Yeah. So as I said before, we have six cancer hospitals, cancer centers that are partnered with us on this program. As of right now. WVU Medicine Children's Hospital, [00:09:30] Morgantown is one, and so is the WVU Cancer Institute. Mary Baab, Randolph Cancer Center. Mary Baab was one of our first, and another one of our first sites was CAMC Cancer Center, Charleston Area Medical Center in Charleston. And we also brought on four additional sites in addition well including W wvu, medicine Children's Hospital this past year. And one of those is Wheeling Hospital and Edwards Comprehensive Cancer Center and Grant Memorial Hospital. [00:10:00] So we have pretty solid coverage across the state. We were able to serve patients from 39 West Virginia counties, so the greater majority of West Virginia counties were covered through partnerships with those six hospitals and in addition to several counties from Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

([10:24](#)):

So we have good coverage. And in this coming year, we're also going to be expanding into two additional hospitals. [00:10:30] We're expanding into Beckley with Appalachian Regional Hospital, their cancer center, and CAMC is also expanding into their Beckley Cancer Center. So we'll have two in Raleigh County and also Preston County, Preston Memorial Hospitals, cancer Centers signing on as well. And we'll have a couple of additional farmers as well. So those are areas that if you're a cancer patient at one of those centers, you can receive these services. As far as other resources that people can obtain for this, [00:11:00] there is a website called Find help.org. And food is one of the options that you can choose if you're in need of food, if you're experiencing food insecurity. But food access can be difficult, especially when it comes to fresh produce. That's why this program is so important to me and was so important to Lauren when she worked to start it with the coalitions, why it was important, Dr. Tomboc and Nita, and important to the farmers that we partner with as well, because getting access in West Virginia to fresh produce in [00:11:30] general can be very difficult, especially depending on the time of year. And some places don't really have access to fresh produce even if they can't afford it. So it is a resource area that we need to continue to work on.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([11:45](#)):

Who would people be looking for outside of West Virginia that could maybe help them with these types of goals? Thinking, could they talk to a nutritionist or could they talk to their social worker about finding nutritious [00:12:00] foods that meet the needs of survivors and patients? Would there be any recommendations from you all?

Anita Graham ([12:07](#)):

One of the resources that we were able to provide families was actually a little checklist or tips list where families could find food resources because I do think our families are challenged from a financial situation when they're dealing with a child with cancer. [00:12:30] Usually one parent has to withdraw from their work in order to be the primary caregiver. So family's incomes are usually cut in half. So just having other resources available to them, especially for food, can be very, very helpful to them. And that's one way that we can try and support them.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([12:57](#)):

I think nutritionists and social workers are kind of the touch [00:13:00] points for services like this within other hospitals and in other systems, they should be people that can access things like this. And I think growing hope could be something that spreads throughout the United States because I think there are people all over the country that have food insecurity, and I'm willing to bet it encompasses patients who are being treated for cancer, either kids or adults, like they said. [00:13:30] I think as an adult, if you are diagnosed, you can't work or your work is very limited. If you have a kid who's diagnosed with cancer, somebody can't work because somebody has to watch that kid take care of that kid and help that kid take all of his medicine, get to the appointments, all those things, and they're just not going to be able to earn as much, have as many resources have access to as much. And so I think something like this where hospitals help provide interest food to the kids and the people who need it is a really good [00:14:00] idea.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([14:00](#)):

And speaking of expansion of the program, are there ways that folks are listening to this, ways that they could support the program and expansion of it?

Lauren Wright ([14:09](#)):

Yes, there are. Dr. Tom Bach and Anita alluded to this or spoke directly to this, but we have as a program evaluated and this program increases hope in the patients that receive the services. It increases normality and normalcy in patients, and it also increases sense of community. So patients [00:14:30] who are receiving this program feel supported by their community, so the community can continue to support this program. And I think the most obvious answer to that is funding. Funding, no matter what type of program you're in, no matter where you are, is usually limited. So that is true of this program as well. Purchasing the produce is the main barrier for some of the hospitals when it comes to sustaining this program and expanding it. So I would say if you have anything that can be helpful with [00:15:00] that, and we have community organizations that have helped some of these in wheeling to local banks, provided bags for them to put produce in. And there are ways, there are plenty of ways to support the program. So if you're interested, definitely please feel free to reach out to any one of the cancer hospitals to us at Mountains of Hope, anyone, and we'd be happy to talk to you about it.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([15:22](#)):

The website for Mountains of Hope is West Virginia Mountains of Hope dot, and you can go on there and find out about other resources [00:15:30] that the Cancer Coalition has, but also specifically about growing Hope and how to support the program. Dr. Tomboc is there ways for folks if they're interested, that want to get involved in the program, either to help foster more growth of the program and also to be a recipient of bags?

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([15:52](#)):

This can do so much and it takes a little, the vegetable costs are not significant. [00:16:00] Transportation is very limited. It is a very lean program that does so much good with very few funds, but we still need those funds to get the food to these kids and to these families. And so I think supporting Mountains of Hope is the way to get to expand this program to every county in the state and then spread it out into the region. There are still many places in Pennsylvania, in [00:16:30] Ohio, I just think it could grow in so many directions. Lauren, I'm happy to talk to anyone who wants to help and give them more details about how it affects our kids and our S.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([16:42](#)):

One thing I always like to ask on these podcasts, I always think it's interesting how you ended up here. I mean, you can kind of come at that however you want to. How did you end up at WVU Medicine? How did you end up at this type of work? [00:17:00] How did you end up working with Mountains of Hope? But I always think it's interesting and I think other people like to know kind of the background of the people that are talking.

Anita Graham ([17:09](#)):

I've been in my position since 1996, so I've been here a long time. And I came from working at a children's service agency here in Alia County. It just was kind of a natural fit for [00:17:30] me when I came on. But I've seen the program grow over time and the number of resources that we are now able to provide our families has grown over the years. Just being able to continue to provide other programs like Growing Hope and nutritional support to our families is just probably one way that I see us [00:18:00] progressing and moving forward.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([18:03](#)):

The way I end up stumbling out Hope was short. I went to Kentucky for a conference. So I went to Kentucky for a conference on brain tumors and building a consortium to look at all the genetic data from brain tumors in the Appalachian Valley to better understand them and better treat 'em. And while I was there, I met a woman whose life work is to get pediatric cancer language into the cancer [00:18:30] programs in every state. There's pediatric cancer language in about 20 cancer programs in the country right now, and it's just not very well recognized. And if there's no language in the cancer program, the priorities of the state won't really align and resources won't really go towards pediatric cancer. So after I was in Kentucky, I came back and I went through the process of figuring out who writes the cancer program and it was Mountains of Hope. And so then I reached out and hopped [00:19:00] on board so I could try and get pediatric cancer language into the state constitution or in the state cancer plan. And so that's how I got involved with Mountains of Hope. But it's been really helpful. I mean, this has probably been the most short-term impactful thing that's come out, mountains of Hope for our kids and our families, our growing hope. But I mean, I foresee a really bright future moving forward, getting more resources, getting more attention to pediatric cancer and pediatric cancer survivors.

Lauren Wright ([19:28](#)):

I am born and raised [00:19:30] in West Virginia. I was born in Beckley and grew up in Beckley and then moved to Morgantown to get my master's in public health. And I work in public health because I grew up watching people I loved and cared about in my community, not be able to access things that they needed to improve their health, keep their health where it needed to be. So it became a passion of mine to [00:20:00] bring access to the care people need and deserve to my people, which are all West Virginians. Those are my people. So the coalition never saw myself facilitating a coalition, but it is one of the, if not the best job I've ever had. So I get to work with people like Dr. Toba and Anita and I get to create programs and expand programs like Growing Hope and I meet wonderful people [00:20:30] and I get to directly serve people. And that is how I came here and why I'll probably not ever leave. Yeah, and Dr. Tomboc is being modest. He did come to Amounts of Hope meeting, just showed up. We not get many oncologists at those meetings. And he showed up, heard about Growing Hope and said, I'm in. What do I need to do? So yeah, you get to work with a lot of great people.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([20:58](#)):

So as we begin to wrap [00:21:00] up today, I just want to revisit some key points. So if listeners were to remember one thing from today's podcast, what would you all hope it would be?

Anita Graham ([21:08](#)):

To remember the Growing Help program and to be supportive of that because it helps a lot of families, not just our families but other families across the state.

Dr. Patrick Tomboc ([21:19](#)):

Anyone can make a difference in the lives of someone who has cancer. You don't have to have a million dollars. You don't have to own things or a dollar helps. Time [00:21:30] helps raise. Getting stuffed animals helps. Anything you can do and anything you do helps someone in a really crappy situation. And if you can even make them smile, make your day a little bit better, that helps. So I think everyone has the power to do something to help someone with cancer

Lauren Wright ([21:49](#)):

In West Virginia. We help our neighbors, we help our communities. That's one of the things that we're known for. It's one of the things that we do. And so if you are interested in learning [00:22:00] more about Growing Hope or about any of the programs, any way that you think you can try to help your neighbors reach out to any of us, and we would be more than happy to figure out a way to help you do that.

Lauren Hixenbaugh ([22:11](#)):

So as always, if you have additional questions, like Lauren said, you can reach out either via email or you can check out the website at wv.mountainsofhope.org. You can also reach out on the WVU Cancer Institute page under Living Beyond Cancer. So Living [00:22:30] Beyond Cancer is created at the WVU Cancer Institute in collaboration with Mountains of Hope, the State's Cancer Coalition in Cancer Prevention and Control. So we'd really like to thank you all for being here with us today and giving us your time and as well as our listeners. We always appreciate you and take your feedback on the podcast and topics that you're interested in. And this was a recommendation. But thank you Anita and Dr. Tom Bach and Lauren all for joining us today.