

Cleaning for a Reason gives cancer patients clean home, hope

By Alex Helm

It all started with a phone call. A prospective client called Buckets & Bows Maid Service inquiring about the cost of a house cleaning. Owner Debbie Sardone gave her an estimate, but it was too much.

"I won't be able to afford that now; I'm undergoing cancer treatment," she said, then hung up.

That's when Sardone had an idea. No woman going through cancer treatment would be turned away by her business.

"I knew I could afford to give it to her, and that one missed opportunity made me make a decision that day to give any woman going through cancer a cleaning for free," Sardone said.

For several years, Sardone's maid service quietly gave free cleanings to cancer patients. But in 2005, Sardone flew to Chicago to attend a national cleaning industry convention. She told her story, and discovered that many other maid services were interested in doing the same thing. Sardone realized that this could be more than just something local her maid service did for women - it could be nationwide.

Since its inception in 2006, Cleaning for a Reason has recruited over 1,200 maid services to donate free house cleanings to over 24,000 women who are undergoing treatment for cancer - valued at over \$6,300,000.

It's very simple to apply. Any woman battling any type of cancer can go to website and click on the patient tab. Type in a zip code and as long as there's a participating maid service, she can click the button and apply. Then she is immediately sent an email saying that Cleaning for a Reason is waiting on a doctor's note, and this note just has to say that she's currently undergoing treatment. She is then matched with a cleaning service.

Stacey Schwinghammer was one of these women. She attended the same exercise class as Sardone, and when she mentioned to Sardone that she had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer for a second time, Sardone told her to be a part of Cleaning for a Reason.

“As soon as she heard, she set me up, and she educated me on the whole process,” Schwinghammer said. “A lot of people don’t want to say they need help, but when you have a clean environment and a clean house it makes you feel like you can do anything.”

Schwinghammer stresses the importance of a service like this. For her, it was hard for her to lift her arms sometimes, and she was incredibly exhausted after chemotherapy treatments. It can be impossible to do anything, especially clean.

She said that a lot of times when you don’t feel good and your environment is better, it gets you through those tough days.

“The maids come in and it’s like extended family,” Schwinghammer said. “The cleaners see what you’re going through, and you’re not a typical client for them. They go above and beyond, and the first question out of their mouth is “how are you doing?” They really strive to give you a sense of comfort. It doesn’t matter how little or big your house is. They’ll ask you what you need and they’ll do it, especially the bathroom and kitchen.”

Sardone loves to see the impact Cleaning for a Reason, and she even gets thank-you letters. One letter in particular stood out to her.

“The woman who wrote it said when she was diagnosed, she wrote off getting well,” Sardone said. “She didn’t think she would beat it. But when she walked into her clean house, she felt back in control of her life and said she felt this rush of confidence that she could beat her cancer. It’s more than clean floors, clean toilets and dusted tables; it creates sense of normalcy and sense of being back in control for these women.”

But Sardone also knows that she can’t help everyone, and that’s the hardest part for her.

“It’s hard knowing that we will always turn away more women than we could possibly serve,” she said. “Every organization has capacity. But in 10 years we’ve helped 24,000 women, and it’s so amazing to see the difference it makes for the women and families that have been helped.”

Schwinghammer is still involved with Cleaning for a Reason, and is now taking an oral pill for her cancer instead of an IV. Sardone continues her work with the nonprofit, and encourages people to donate, volunteer, become a fundraiser, as well as encourages more maid services to participate.