

# WomenCARE returns from brink

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Three months ago, WomenCARE, a popular Santa Cruz County nonprofit that supports women with cancer, appeared doomed.

The group's board had resigned. The budget was in shambles. Bills were mounting.

Since then, though, a new board of directors, motivated staff and dedicated volunteers

have raised tens of thousands of dollars and revitalized the 16-year-old organization in an effort to ensure it will continue supporting hundreds of women suffering from cancer around the county.

"There's no way you can't fight for it," said LaVerne Coleman, who began working at WomenCARE seven years ago after her best friend died of cancer. She and former office manager Allison Titley spearheaded the effort to keep the organization alive after the board stepped down. They are now co-directors.

WomenCARE has offices in Capitola and Watsonville, and provides counseling and support in English and Spanish. The nonprofit offers referrals, a reference library and support at home with meals, child care and light cleaning, among other services. The group boasts more than 100 volunteers.

WomenCARE's problems came to a head in May, after grants worth hundreds of thousands of dollars ran out, and no new donors stepped forward to replace them. A donor's pledge to cover two years' rent at WomenCARE's 41st Avenue office also fell through. Leaders burned through the nonprofit's savings to pay bills as they searched for new funds, but by late spring board members had had enough. They voted to dissolve the orga-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Current WomenCARE co-director and director of volunteer services LaVerne Coleman works the phones at the organization's 41st Avenue offices.

## If You Go

**WHAT:** Open house at WomenCARE to thank community for its support.

**WHERE:** WomenCARE main office, 1001 41st Ave., Capitola.

**WHEN:** 3-6 p.m. Saturday.

**DETAILS:** 457-2273.

nization and they all resigned.

Desperate, Coleman and Titley sent a letter to past and present WomenCARE clients. They held a meeting at Loudon Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz, hoping some would step forward to help.

They ended up attracting a new board of women, many with business and management experience, which is now reshaping the nonprofit.

The board's new president, Michelle Ney, works as the executive assistant to the chief technology officer at Plantronics. She is a cancer survivor and former WomenCARE volunteer.

Ney signed up for the board that night at Loudon Nelson because "I could not imagine my life without WomenCARE in it," she said.

Hundreds of donors chipped in. Past clients pushed checks through the office mail slot after hours. An anonymous donor gave \$10,000. One volunteer knocked on doors in her neighborhood and collected \$1,000 in contributions. In three months, the group raised more than \$40,000. The board's aim is to raise an initial \$80,000 to get

the nonprofit back on track.

Meanwhile, the new board is working to establish goals, a revised budget and long-term direction, Ney said. That planning should be finished in October. The nonprofit also is examining costs and applying for new grants, Ney said, and going through old bookkeeping to learn from past financial decisions. Ney said there is no signs of illegal or suspicious handling of funds by previous board members or staff.

Coleman said she has been amazed by the outpouring of support and donations.

"We live in an incredible community, we really do," Coleman said. "Unfortunately, I think everyone has been touched by cancer."