



By Brandi Schlossberg  
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## Handle with **Care**

Meet five women who support local breast cancer patients with passion and grace

Behind nearly every breast cancer survivor, there is a team of caregivers who provide support, from simply listening to setting up treatment plans. Each of these caregivers has her own role to play in the lives of women with breast cancer, from diagnosis to survivorship.

According to the American Cancer Society, there are more than 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the United States alone. Based on that number, one can imagine the massive network of caregivers stretching from coast to coast.

A large number of these caregivers are family members and friends, walking side-by-side with loved ones on the journey through breast cancer and beyond. Then, there are those who have made caregiving a career, working to help women who have breast cancer. From doctors and nurses to personal trainers and peers providing support, breast cancer caregivers seem to come in all capacities.

In honor of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month,

RENO Magazine is placing the spotlight on five of these career caregivers, each working a different way to enhance — and even save — the lives of breast cancer patients right here in Northern Nevada.

Read on to meet our five breast cancer caregivers: radiation oncologist Katie Legarza, exercise specialist Eren Sanborn, peer-support professional Ann Proffitt, radiologist Dr. Antoinette Cortese, and nurse Bobbi Gillis.

Find out what motivated these women to become professional caregivers in the first place, as well as the ways they stay inspired to support women with breast cancer.

## Bobbi GILLIS

Nurse

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, Bobbi Gillis has been serving patients as a registered nurse. For the past decade, she has been working with one specific patient population — women with breast cancer.

“My mother was a nurse, my father was a doctor, and most of my relatives were in the health care field,” Gillis says. “I always knew I would pursue a nursing career.”

In the beginning, her interest was cardiac trauma nursing, but after watching her mother battle breast cancer, Gillis decided to take her nursing career in a different direction.

“When I learned how breast cancer can be much more easily treated if found at an early stage,” she says, “I decided to focus my nursing skills on educating and supporting women as they go through the process of diagnosis and treatment.”

Today, Gillis is a certified breast care nurse who serves as breast nurse navigator and breast program coordinator at Renown Institute for Cancer.

“I love to learn, and this skill has been helpful,” Gillis says, “as the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer is changing constantly as researchers find better ways to find cancer early and treat it successfully.”

Gillis finds joy spending time with her family and friends, as well as working with breast cancer patients and also giving care to herself, through meditation and prayer.

“Meditation and prayer helps me to center myself spiritually, so I can balance,” Gillis says. “My patients bring me joy when they get to the point in their healing where they can find their own balance and calm.”



## Antoinette CORTESE

Radiologist

SHE NEVER MET THE WOMAN SHE WAS named after, but it was this woman — her grandmother — who inspired Dr. Antoinette Cortese to become a breast imaging expert.

“My grandmother died at age 40 of metastatic breast cancer, when my father was 16 and my uncles were 10 and 2,” says Cortese, a board-certified radiologist and director of the Breast Imaging Center at Sierra Surgery Hospital in Carson City. “I strive to detect cancers early, so that patients can be there to meet their granddaughters.”

With her grandmother in mind, Cortese makes it a point to personally discuss imaging results with each patient who comes to her practice for diagnostic mammography or ultrasound.

“I also perform image-guided breast biopsies and discuss the pathology results with patients,” she says. “As such, I am the first to tell the patient she has breast cancer.”

“When I tell a patient she has cancer,” Cortese continues, “I always think of how I would have wanted my grandmother to have been treated.”

On Wednesdays and Thursdays, Cortese interprets screening mammograms while her patients wait, in order to give the women the most immediate results.

“I know how stressful it is for breast cancer survivors and patients with a family history of breast cancer to wait for the results to be mailed to them,” she says. “This service allows them to have immediate peace of mind.”

The doctor’s efforts don’t go unnoticed. Recently, Cortese had a 44-year-old patient thank her through tears for finding her breast cancer early.

“We hugged, and I thought to myself that I couldn’t be in a more gratifying field,” she says. “Detecting early cancers allows me to truly save lives.”



## Ann PROFFITT

Peer support professional

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, Ann Proffitt was diagnosed with breast cancer and given a grim prognosis — a 25 percent chance she would live another five years.

“Back then, nobody talked about survivorship,” Proffitt says. “I didn’t even know such a thing existed.”

Searching for support, Proffitt found a fledgling group for people with cancer. She was asked to serve as the group’s co-facilitator, along with a local nurse. Soon, staff at Carson Tahoe Regional Healthcare began approaching Proffitt to speak to women who have breast cancer on a case-by-case basis.

By 2000, her organic effort to promote survivorship turned into the Carson Tahoe Cancer Resource Center. Founded by Proffitt, the center provides support services for 400 to 500 newly diagnosed cancer patients per year, a large percentage of whom are women with breast cancer.

“I feel like I found my spot in life,” Proffitt says, “talking to people about survivorship and helping them understand that it’s a real thing and it does exist.”

“I love being able to help women find themselves again and find the strength to get on with their lives,” she adds. “Survivorship has to be the best it can be, whether it’s three years or 30 years of the rest of your life.”

According to Proffitt, one of the most precious gifts of survivorship is the ability to cherish aspects of life you once may have taken for granted.

“I got to see my daughter grow up, and I got to see my son become a father, and I’m able to spend time with two beautiful grandchildren I never thought I’d meet,” Proffitt says. “That’s survivorship — living to see all these wonderful things.”



## Katie LEGARZA

Radiation oncologist

AN OBSERVATION HAS EMERGED during the nine years Dr. Katie Legarza has been working with breast cancer patients. Even though these women are the ones receiving treatment, most seem to stay rooted in the role of caregiver.

“I find most women have trouble letting go of the caregiving instinct, even when they are the ones in need,” says Legarza, a board-certified radiation oncologist and partner at Radiation Oncology Associates. “There’s a patient who is coming in daily for her treatments this month — she gives me a hug every time I see her, and it makes my day.”

“Another patient of mine is a fabulous cook,” Legarza says. “She brings me new recipes every time she comes for a follow-up.”

In her role as a career caregiver, Legarza delivers radiation therapy as part of a comprehensive approach to treating breast cancer. She works alongside other cancer care experts, including surgeons, medical oncologists, and nurses.

“Every day, I see how devastating the words ‘you have breast cancer’ can be,” Legarza says. “My mother-in-law has survived bilateral breast cancer, and she’s a great inspiration to me, because she’s an important part of my life and my children’s lives.”

“I want to help other women survive,” she adds, “because their families need them, too.”

The daughter of a retired physician, Legarza always admired how much her father loved his job and enjoyed helping patients. Today, she gets to feel that same sense of satisfaction.

“I have a pile of thank-you notes and letters from patients and their families that I keep in my office,” Legarza says. “They remind me that there is joy in survival and grace in dying.”



# Cover

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## *Eren* SANBORN

Medical exercise specialist

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RATHER THAN WORKING TOWARD goals such as a flatter stomach and firmer thighs, medical exercise specialist Eren Sanborn mostly focuses on helping her clients, who are breast cancer patients and survivors, regain the ability to function normally in daily life.

“I have one client who only wanted to be able to blow-dry her hair and shave her armpits again,” says Sanborn, who holds a master’s in exercise science and works within the cancer wellness program at Saint Mary’s Center for Health and Fitness. “Her program focuses mainly on flexibility, and after a few short months, we’ve seen a dramatic improvement.”

Sanborn works one-on-one and also in small groups with breast cancer patients and survivors. She aims to provide proper wellness coaching, answering any questions her clients might have about nutrition, exercise, and the benefits of fitness for recovery.

“The goal of our program is to give back some of the strength that has been lost not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally,” Sanborn says. “I design individual programs to help decrease fatigue, improve range of motion and flexibility, and increase strength.”

Officially, Sanborn serves as a teacher to women in various stages of recovery from breast cancer, but she says the learning experience goes both ways.

“The women I work with inspire me,” Sanborn says. “They have taught me as much as — if not more — than I have taught them.

“We often take so much of our lives for granted,” she adds. “These women have so much patience and desire to live.” 

