

She-she jewelry: One woman's health-care story inspires the Onyx Fund for Women, where one necklace buys hope

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

Taking time from her housekeeping job in Carmel to deliver her baby at Natividad Medical Center was going to create a welcome break, a life-changing event and a hardship for a young Latina named Onix. A member of the class of "working poor," she made barely enough money to get by, too much money to qualify for financial assistance and not enough money to pay for private insurance.

So, when Onix's OB-GYN discovered moderate fibroid tumors in her uterus, which needed to be surgically removed, she didn't have the requisite \$3,000 down payment to schedule her surgery. Onix became what her doctor calls a "disappearing patient"; one who receives a diagnosis she cannot afford to resolve, so she and her malady disappear until she becomes sick enough to warrant in-patient care or too sick to survive it.

Meanwhile, her doctor added her name and number to his "worry list"; a piece of paper he kept folded

in his pocket, so he could contact the patients who slipped beyond reach, to check on the status of their health and their ability to raise enough money for treatment.

Four years later, Onix returned to Natividad, looking eight or nine months pregnant. Bleeding, in pain and panicked she might lose her job, her daughter or her life, she submitted to an examination, which revealed she was not pregnant; her tumors had grown to the point of crisis.

It was the worst case her doctors had ever seen. Nevertheless, it was not life threatening and, therefore, was considered elective surgery, not covered by insurance. Onix still needed to come up with \$3,000. It took her another six months to earn, raise and borrow that much money.

"When I heard Onix's story, it really touched my heart," said Linda L. Ford, president and CEO of the Natividad Medical Foundation. "I was horrified to realize that women who live and work in our



When this Salinas woman named Onix was pregnant with her daughter, shown here, she needed surgery to remove fibroid tumors in her uterus, but didn't have the requisite \$3,000 down payment to schedule her surgery. The Onyx Fund for Women is designed to help patients like Onix in the future. (SCOTT NOBLES/Special to The Herald)

communities, who pass by us on the street, are living in dire need of medical attention because they cannot afford what often are routine procedures. Not on my watch, I thought. I needed to do something about it."

In honor of Onix and in support of

continued

She-she jewelry: One woman's health-care story inspires the Onyx Fund for Women, where one necklace buys hope

so many like her, Ford worked with Dr. Brian Aguilera and Dr. Peter Chandler to create The Onyx Fund for Women through which to raise money and help these women pay for their down payments, so they can schedule their surgery.

“The beauty of Onyx Fund,” said Dr. Chandler, “is that it helps the rest of the community get involved in helping to take care of this group in our community that has big needs and a great degree of suffering. These women are right under our noses, so we need to get the word out and help them the first time they come in. I’m a passionate guy about women’s healthcare, but I’m not very creative. Once we hooked up with Linda, who is both passionate and creative, she just lit up, and we knew we could help a lot of people.”

Dr. Caleb Liem and Dr. Chandler each gave \$1,000 to get the fund started. Then Ford submitted a grant application to the Community Foundation for Monterey County, asking for \$30,000. They granted The Onyx Fund a 2:1 matching grant, meaning for every dollar they raised, the Community Foundation would give them two, up to \$50,000.

“As a foundation, we saw so many win-wins in this project,” said Jackie Wendland, director of grants and donor advisor services for the Community Foundation. “These surgeries provide immediate medical benefits to restore health and end suffering, and long-term social and economic benefits as these women are able to return to work and support their families. We saw the opportunity to jump in with more money than they asked for because we had the funds from different donor estates who wanted to support underserved populations. This created a snapshot of the two main things we do: fulfill philanthropic wishes and get that money into the community where it does its good work.”

Next, Ford needed to come up with a way to raise funds against the matching grant. While tossing and turning with thoughts swirling around what she might do, it came to her like a gift in the night. A jewelry designer who specializes in ancient and trade beads, the stories surrounding them and the women who once wore them, Ford decided to design a necklace.

“Once I thought of it, it was so obvious,” she said. “I only wonder why I didn’t see the connection sooner. I decided to design a necklace in the shape of an O and add onyx stones. I was actually at a conference in Puebla, Mexico, picking out artistic items, when I found a charm, in the shape of a stylized O that inspired my design.”

The necklace, which features three onyx stones set in a sterling silver charm suspended from a black, adjustable cord, comes in a gift bag and includes Onyx’s story. Available through www.theonyxfund.com, it sells for \$125, \$100 of which goes into the Onyx Fund for Women.

“Our goal,” said Ford, “is to raise \$1 million to support women like Onyx, so they can get the gynecological surgery they need, get healthy and return to work, so they can take care of their families. To date, we have raised \$33,000, which will fund 13 surgeries.”

For more information, visit www.theonyxfund.com, www.natividadfoundation.org or call 755-4187.