



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

Ann Hogge (left) used a charm bracelet as a way of supporting an out-of-town friend suffering through breast cancer. She turned the idea into a business, Links of Love. Adherents include Laurie Crouch, who has become a vocal proponent of the idea.

Links of LOVE

A way to show support when a friend gets breast cancer

BY BETTY BOOKER
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

When a friend is diagnosed with breast cancer, people rally around with food, checkup calls, cards, baby-sitting and shoulders to cry on.

Ann Hogge does those things, too, for in-town friends.

But when her childhood friend, Ellen Keeter, a Virginia Beach banker, was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was too far from Richmond to receive routine hands-on support from Hogge.

Hogge was left with that "what can I do?" feeling.

The marketing executive came up with an idea: Create something Keeter could take with her to cancer treatments so she would know she was loved.

The idea: a sterling silver bracelet that friends could fill with charms symbolizing their personal connections with her.

Without telling her friend, Hogge bought a bracelet, with a pink breast cancer charm attached, and invited Keeter's friends, colleagues and community contacts to take turns sending a charm every week.

"People came out of the woodwork," Hogge said.

By the time treatments were over, Keeter had two bracelets and more than 80 charms. She wore them to medical appointments and carried a bag stuffed with the letters of encouragement that came with each charm.

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Nearly 5,000 women are diagnosed with invasive breast cancer annually in Virginia, said Dr. Ellen Shaw de Paredes, a Richmond-based international ex-

pert on breast mammography. Kindnesses during treatment, she said, are appreciated.

It's no wonder, then, that others heard about the charm bracelet idea and wanted to do it for their friends.

"Just about every week, somebody I know gets breast cancer — and they're in their 40s and early 50s," said Hogge, 50. Two of her relatives were diagnosed, then her friend, Keeter, in 2004.

"It was so obvious to me that people were so taken with this idea. . . . I just knew if this brought Ellen so much happiness, I knew it could bring other people happiness, too, even if I don't know who they are."

Laurie Crouch, a Richmond graphic design firm co-owner, orchestrated a charm bracelet brigade for the wife of a former colleague. Crouch has since become a volunteer cheerleader for the bracelet idea.

The charm bracelets "brought so much pleasure" to Keeter that a

year ago, Hogge set up Links of Love, a micro-business sideline to her main career as co-owner of Southeast Media Consultants.

It's mostly handled online at www.linksoflove.com, but the Links of Love number is (804) 288-0137 if you have questions or don't use a computer. Ten percent of the money it produces goes to the Susan B. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Hogge has sold about 20.

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later.

While the charm-senders identify themselves in the letters they send with the charms, the originator of the Links of Love bracelet doesn't say who she or he is until the end of treatment.

Recipients usually shed a few tears, Hogge said, as does the person who started the chain.

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