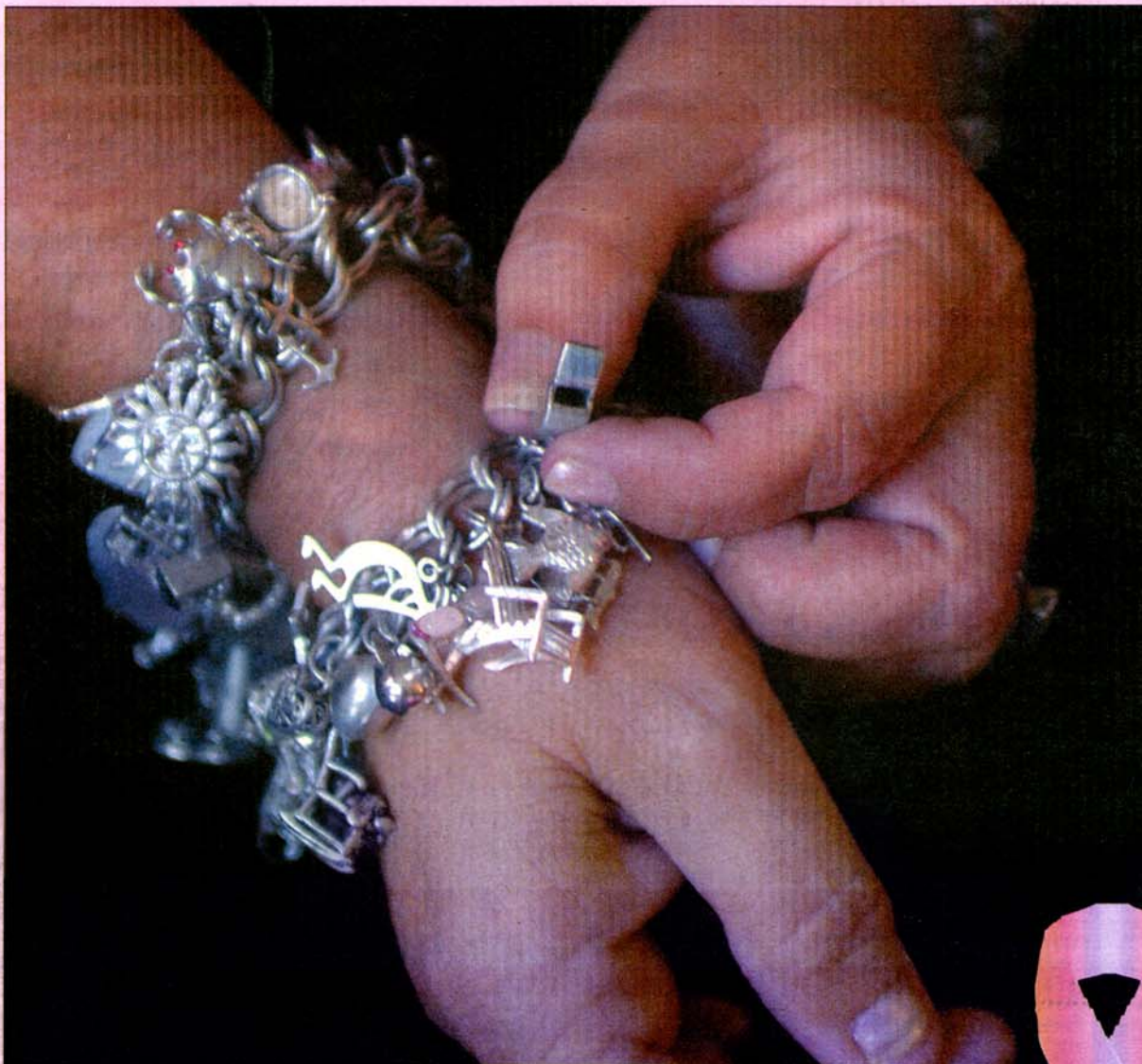




THE VIRGINIA BEACH
Beacon



BARBARA J. WOERNER / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

CHARMED LIFE

Ellen Keeter's charms talk to her all the time. They chat about 75 happy memories or offer encouragement, and helped her through cancer treatment challenges / PAGE 38



COVER STORY

ELLEN KEETER'S CHARMED LIFE

The healing effects of a love letter and bracelet grew along with the stream of trinkets that flowed on and on and on

BY LAINE M. RUTHERFORD
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The package Ellen Keeter plucked out of her mailbox last November came as unexpectedly as did the diagnosis of breast cancer she had received after a routine mammogram the month before.

The small, padded envelope addressed to her in pink ink and adorned with breast cancer stamps, gave no indication of who sent it or what was inside.

Opening it, the mother of two, who at the time was recovering from a double mastectomy, reconstructive surgery and was just beginning chemotherapy, found a small, cloth, drawstring bag. Inside was a silver charm bracelet with a single charm — a pink breast cancer awareness ribbon.

The outside of the enclosed card read: *Love is the best medicine.* The inside had a printed message: *Links of Love bracelet has arrived! Wear this, keep adding charms, and know that our prayers, our love, and our support are with you each day. Your strength and courage are an example to us all. We love you!*

"I wasn't quite sure what it was," remembered Keeter, 48. "And honestly, at the time, I wasn't quite sure I wanted to wear it, because I didn't want to be known as 'Ellen, she has breast cancer.'"

"I wanted to be known as 'Ellen, she made a difference in the world.'"

Then the charms started coming.

And coming, and coming, and coming.

And along with the charms came cards from friends, family, co-workers, old boy-



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Richmond friend Anne Hogge, left, Ellen Keeter, in breast cancer remission, and Franny Beasley admire Keeter's bracelets. Keeter wears two charm bracelets with 75 different charms given by friends. Keeter said the bracelets are constant reminders of their love and support.

friends, new neighbors — all with handwritten notes filled with encouragement and prayers and an explanation of the charm they'd chosen for Ellen.

Unknown to Keeter, a childhood friend, Ann Hogge, had put into action a plan that would prove to be life changing, as it turned out, not just for Keeter, but for all of those involved, as well.

"I live in Richmond, and I knew I couldn't give her a meal or take her places, and I was struggling with what I could do for Ellen that was tangible and lasting," Hogge said.

"And then this idea just came to me: Why not give her a charm bracelet and see if other people want to be part of it, to link to Ellen with love?" Hogge hoped people would

LINKING UP

Individualized Links of Love kits, including the bracelet, letters and calendar, sell for \$110, with a portion of the price going toward breast cancer programs and research. Kits do not have to be specifically for those undergoing treatment for breast cancer, but can be sent for birthdays, remembrances or other special occasions.

For more information, call (804) 288-0137, visit www.linksoflove.com, or write info@linksoflove.com.

want to participate. The plan was to have a different person send a charm to Keeter weekly, giving her something to look forward to during the chemotherapy and radiation that would be a part of her life for at least six months.

With the help of Franny Beasley, another childhood friend of Keeter's who lives in Virginia Beach, Hogge compiled a list of 30 people. She composed a letter, describing

her relationship with Keeter and the idea behind "Links of Love."

"Links of Love is a gift to Ellen that builds over time," she wrote. "Just as our prayers and encouragement for Ellen grow each week, so will her bracelet."

The response was immediate.

"Everyone who got the letter wanted to be a part of it. They couldn't wait to send

Ellen their charm. And other people found out about it and they wanted to be part of it, too."

By the time Hogge sent the bracelet to Keeter, she had people scheduled for months in her Links of Love for Ellen calendar.

Each Friday, she sent a reminder e-mail to the person whose week it was so there would be no break in the chain. Eventually, the list grew to more than 50, and Keeter was receiving charms three times a week.

"I couldn't wait to give her my charms," said Nancy Leigh Gainfort, who ended up getting two sterling silver pieces for Keeter, and delivering them to her during a chemotherapy treatment. "I just couldn't decide, so I gave her a cross and a car. We used to carpool together to school

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when we were little."

Gainfort said the act of choosing a charm for Keeter had an unexpected impact on her own life.

"The easy part of this is to see what the bracelet did for Ellen. When she jingles it, she says, 'That's all my friends chattering with me.' What ended up happening, though, for me and every single person who was involved - it forced them to slow down long enough to think about all the people in your life."

As the charms arrived in her mailbox, or were handed to her by colleagues at work, or presented by smiling nurses at her doctor's office, Keeter would marvel over the tiny pieces of jewelry.

She'd drive to Baker's Fine Jewelry and Gifts on Laskin Road and have the baubles soldered on, always asking that the bracelet be ready in time for her treatment at the doctor's office.

"To see her face, when she'd come in and show us her new charm and tell us the story about who gave it to her, was amazing," said Doris Wade, an employee at Baker's. "And once you talked to her and saw how thrilled she was, you just wanted to be a part of it. We gave her a charm, too. A star."

The day came when Wade finally had to tell Keeter there was no more room on the charm bracelet. Both sides were filled. Keeter couldn't leave any off.

So, she bought another bracelet and began filling that one as well. When Keeter's treatments finally ended in August, 75 charms dangled, jingled and jangled from the two bracelets.

She doesn't always wear them. Her arm was bare the day she had to step on the scale at the doctor's office. But she won't wear one without the other; Keeter sees the charms as true representations of her friends, and she wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

"What's happened with this bracelet is that it was not only support for me during my treatment for cancer," she said, "but my friends are with me all the time now, whenever I need them."

Flipping and spinning the chains, she can pick up any charm and tell its story:

"See this Talbot's charm? I met this girl with her mother-in-law at that store and we



BARBARA J. WOERNER PHOTOS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The Links of Love charm bracelet kit was created by Ann Hogge of Richmond. Ellen Keeter, from Virginia Beach, found one in her mailbox while going through breast cancer treatment.

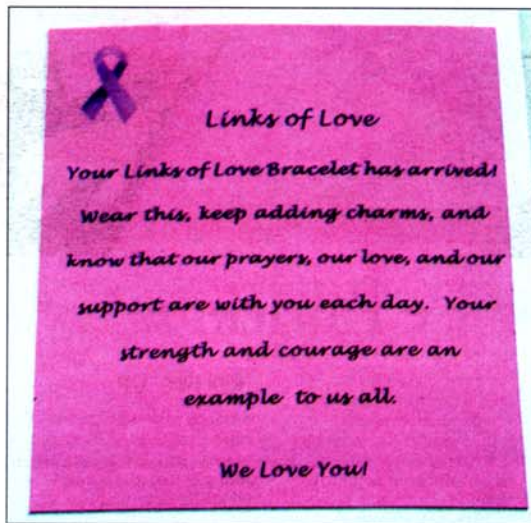


became friends and neighbors. She took her bill to Goldbar's Jewelers and had them scan the bill and engrave it on this charm!

"The palm tree came from Franny. We went to Paradise Island together, and she got me a charm from there.

"This little monkey is on here because a friend and I love the band The Monkees, and we went to see them in concert together."

She continued, "The airplane is from my travel agent. Ann's mother gave me this prayer box. An old boyfriend sent me a sailboat - we taught sailing together. The bell is on here because I always gather people the day after Thanksgiving to ring the bell for the Salvation Army. A friend gave me silhouettes of my boys because she said 'they're your angels.'



This greeting comes with the Links of Love bracelet and charm.

"My mother gave me a church. This one is really special because my church has meant so much to me."

Keeter, who is a Bank of America consumer market executive who continued to work throughout her treatment, could go on for hours, telling about the horseshoe, sunglasses, fish, champagne glass, high-heeled shoe, umbrella, swan boat, cowboy hat, San Francisco cable car, sand bucket and shovel, several gleaming stars.

"Unless you've been in my shoes, it's hard to know just how important this is," Keeter said, her normally cheery exterior clouding a bit with emotion. "I look at it and ponder it, and it spurs happiness. All the time."

The bracelet has become a way for Keeter to get the message out about the importance of routine mammograms - the way her lobular breast cancer was discovered.

One of the participants in Keeter's bracelet contacted

ALSO FIGHTING BREAST CANCER....

The fifth annual Komen Tidewater Race for the Cure will be held Saturday at 17th Street Park and Atlantic Avenue, beginning with late registration and packet pickup at 6:45 a.m. Categories include: a 5K run/fitness walk; a 5K Race certified by USA Track and Field; a One-Mile Fun Run/Walk; and Kids for the Cure 50 Yard Dash for children ages 10 and younger.

Additional events are the Tinkled Pink Contest to decorate the portable toilets and a Shop for the Cure pink ribbon merchandise sale.

Proceeds benefit breast health services and programs for women in need in the Hampton Roads area as well as Susan G. Komen national breast cancer research.

To register, visit www.hamptonroads.com/raceforthecure, or call 490-7794 for more information, registration fees and race schedule.

Hogge when another friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. With Hogge's help, and an individualized kit Hogge created with her newly formed Links of Love bracelet, Emily Mills started a chain bracelet for her friend.

"This is a gift that will last a lifetime, and her children's lifetime," Mills said.

"It's not costly; most charms cost under \$20, and you can just slip them in a card. And it's not invasive. It's a way to make contact when you don't know what to do, to let someone know you care and to give them strength whenever they may need it."

Keeter is in remission now and is optimistic about her future. Her hope, though, is that others can share some of what she has gained through what began as a simple silver bracelet with a single pink ribbon charm.

"When you drop a rock in the water, you have a ripple effect. This," she said, pointing to her bracelet, "is that ripple effect."

■ Reach Beacon correspondent Laine McRulthierford at lmrvab@aol.com.