FROM A CHANCE MEETING TO A CHANCE TO HELP
You never know who you’re sitting next to at the nail salon, nor how it can change your life. In the case of Julie Shames, a chance meeting led her to Tower, and to championing cancer research.

Julie and Brad Shames have always been philanthropic, but their personal experience with cancer brought their involvement to another level. In October 2000, they were happily married with two daughters, 11 and 15, and an 8-year-old son. Then, at age 40, Julie was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had surgery and was treated with both chemotherapy and radiation. Today, thankfully, she is cancer free.

Since her diagnosis, Julie has been outspoken about her experience. “Very early on in my treatment and diagnosis I was all about what can I do to give back,” says Julie. Within the first year of her diagnosis, while still undergoing radiation, she participated in the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer. “I did the Avon three day walk, not even a year after my diagnosis, but I was all about being very vocal about my experience and sharing with other cancer survivors because at 40, I didn’t know anyone who had cancer. Sadly, today we know everyone is either a cancer survivor or somebody touched by cancer.”

After the Avon and Revlon campaigns against cancer, Julie was seeking something a little more hands-on. And hands proved to be the catalyst she needed. Julie was getting a manicure when she met Nancy Mishkin in the salon. “Nancy told me that at Tower, they have volunteers in the treatment center, and she put me in touch with the right people. I went to work the following Monday—in a uniform! I passed out snacks, provided comfort to people going through chemotherapy or infusions, and just listened to their stories.” Julie continues, “I did that for a few years, and then somebody suggested I get involved with the Magnolias. I went to a meeting and fell in love with the people.” In the Magnolia Council, Julie found a group of enthusiastic women and has served as co-chair at its annual luncheon several times since.

Brad has been by her side through it all. Supporting Julie in her mission, Brad works on the committee for the Jack Mishkin Memorial Golf Classic, regularly attends charitable functions, goes to educational programs hosted by doctors, and solicits donations from his friends, business associates and customers. As Brad says, “Everybody has been touched by cancer. Everybody knows our story and helps support the research for cancer. My beautiful wife here, this is her gig. There are different ways of giving: cancer research, cancer treatment, drug therapies… Julie’s always wanted to be a part of the research side of it so that they can develop cures or vaccines, or identify whatever could help earlier rather than later. We are glad Julie was diagnosed at 40 instead of at 50. It’s important to find out as early as possible.”

Julie came to feel that if she had to go through this horrible experience at such a young age, that she could at least help make it easier for others. “Early on, my focus really was giving to breast cancer research. I had two young daughters and even though I wasn’t a carrier of the BRCA gene, I still was really concerned about my daughters, my sisters and my friends. I supported research through Avon’s and Revlon’s campaigns and I raised a lot of money.” Brad adds, “Our daughter was featured in an Avon Spotlight titled ‘Raising Money for Mommy.’ She was the largest fundraiser in three years.”

“I didn’t want to change who I was,” Julie says. “I wanted women to know that you could have cancer and feel good and wear pretty things anyway.” Julie firmly believes in getting the word out that someone can have cancer and still live a healthy, full and wonderful life. “I’d go to basketball games and do everything between my chemo treatments; I wanted to show people that you can. It was really important and it helped me heal,” Julie explains. Julie surprises some with her candidness: “Anything that they want to know. Anytime. She could be a complete stranger but Julie is always ready to provide answers and support. ‘What it’s like going through treatment, what kind of treatment did you go through, what’s the surgery like, how’s the recovery?’”

Julie has made a lot of great friends through the Magnolia Council. She loves seeing the men working and being so supportive too, because it doesn’t just hit women. Cancer hits men too, as Julie is quick to point out. “It affects them in terms of their own diagnoses and those of their wives.”

Julie and Brad are as vocal as ever about fighting cancer, and you get the sense that they won’t stop at anything but a cure. Together, along with their children, they are a team—a team that has fought through adversity and emerged even closer, ready to share their strength with others.