



AMH Oncology Benefits from Alton High Group

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ALTON, IL – The Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America group at Alton High School has done many community service projects in recent years, but this year's project was a bit more personal than usual. Alton Memorial Hospital's Cancer and Infusion Center is benefiting as a result.

One of the FCCLA advisers, Regina Birch, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the beginning of the school year. Three members of the club -- Paige Ontis, Abby Jarnagin and Maddie Besaw -- organized a community service project that kept growing. The final step was to sew port pillows for cancer patients. The girls hosted a sewing workshop Jan. 29 where 26 students, FCCLA alumni members, and adults learned how to make the port pillows. In total, 165 port pillows were donated to the Infusion Center on Jan. 31.

The port pillows are designed to provide both protection and comfort for breast cancer patients while they are in a vehicle. The pillows have Velcro straps that wrap around a seatbelt strap.

“When patients put a seatbelt on, the belt will often cross right over the catheter,” said Donna Campbell, assistant nurse manager of the AMH Cancer Infusion Center. “We’ve had patients tell us in the past that this is the most uncomfortable part about the port. So having these port pillows is a tremendous help to us in caring for our patients. We are so grateful to Alton High and the FCCLA.”

A port is a small disc — about the size of a quarter — made of plastic or metal that sits just under the skin. The catheter connects the port to a large vein. Chemotherapy medicines are given through a special needle that fits right into the port. Blood draws can also be taken through the ports.

FCCLA members said they were devastated when they learned of Birch's diagnosis.

“We all wanted to do something to contribute, to help other people out,” said Abby Jarnagin. “We knew how it felt to have someone in our lives that is going through that.”

This year’s project began with a campaign to educate others about breast cancer in October by creating informational brochures to distribute, as well as a bulletin board at the high school for parent-teacher conferences. The FCCLA also decided to raise funds for cancer research. By selling pink awareness armbands and sundaes, they raised \$1,165 to be divided between Alton Memorial Hospital Foundation's "You've Got a Friend" fund and the Siteman Cancer Center Foundation for Research. AMH is now part of the Siteman Cancer Network.

The You’ve Got a Friend Fund is a wonderful service for our patients,” said Kristen Ryrie, manager of Development at AMH. “Patients who we identify as having financial stresses due to their diagnosis can fill out an application for assistance. We can spend \$800 per person and help with car repairs, rent/mortgage, utility payments, gas cards, etc., so they can focus on healing and making it to appointments. Any help for this fund is greatly appreciated and goes directly to the patients.”

“I have surgery and then will undergo radiation treatment at Alton Memorial,” Birch said. “I’m not going down without a fight, and I’m very thankful to everyone in the group. They have really gotten behind this and done a lot of great things.”