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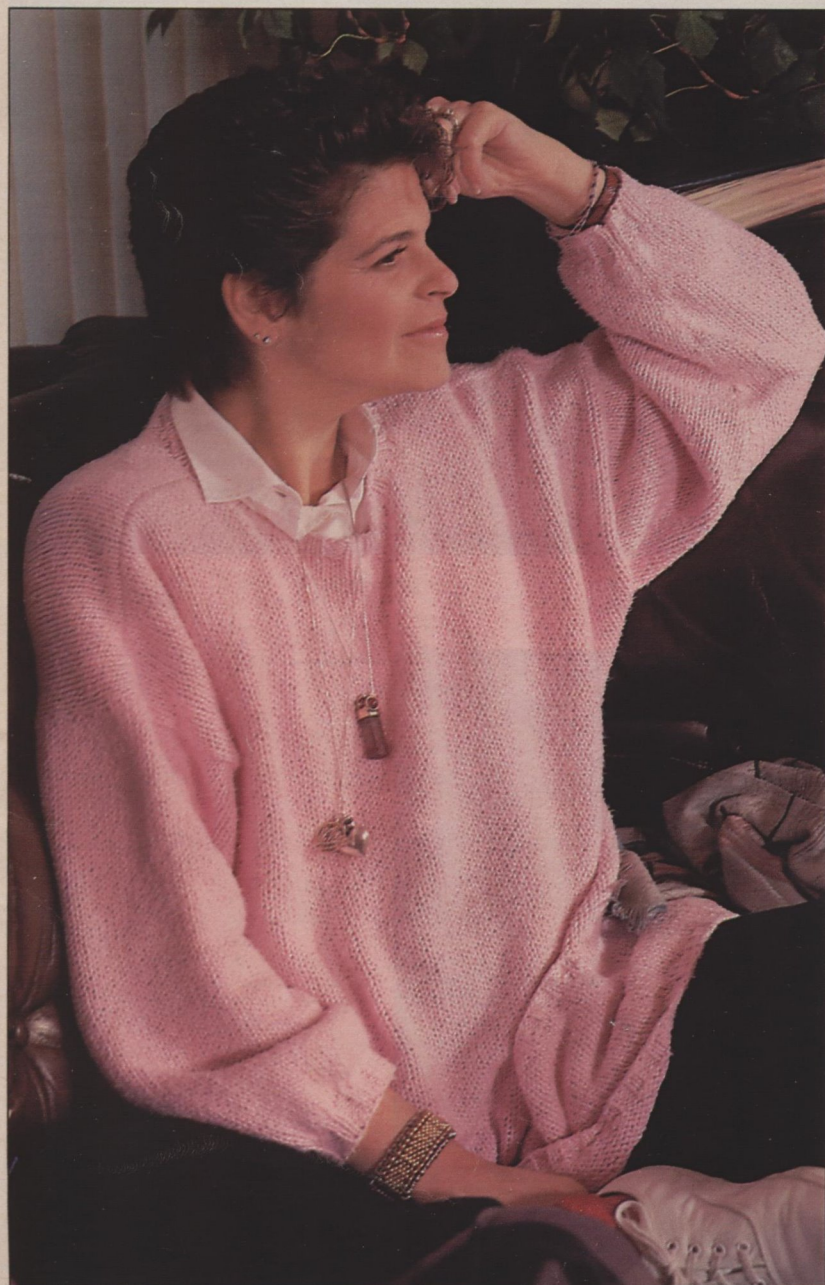
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Gilda

The wisecracking actress laughs in the face of cancer

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Says Radner, 41, "I think of my illness as a school, and finally I've graduated."

Her hair was a tangle, her voice was a squawk, and she walked like a chicken, but in her *Saturday Night Live* heyday, Gilda Radner could transform herself into just about anyone. She could be Emily Litella, the befuddled editorialist who got into dithers over such issues as *Violins on Television* and *Oppressed Soviet Jewelry*. She could be Roseanne Roseannadanna, the reporter who could turn any story into a digression on bunions, leaky

noses or earwax. She could be Rhonda Weiss, the Jewish American Princess who was up in arms over the banning of saccharin. "I'm sorry about the lab animals," sniffed Rhonda, "but statistics prove that most guys prefer skinny girls with cancer over healthy girls with bulging thighs."

That last routine is one Radner would just as soon forget. Seventeen months ago, she learned she had cancer of the ovaries. After an article in the *National Enquirer* reported she weighed 80 pounds and was near death, she was deluged with cards saying goodbye and thanks for the memories. Today Radner needs little provocation to yank up her sweater and show off her newly "fat" stomach, and after eight months of baldness, her unruly brown hair (now with a bit of gray at the temples) has grown back in a thick thatch. She has stopped smoking, eats more wholesomely than she ever did before her illness and, with no apologies to Rhonda, has sworn off artificial sugar. "Cancer," she says, "is about the most unfunny thing in the world. But it doesn't have to mean you die."

Twenty years ago the average life expectancy of a patient with ovarian cancer was between six and seven months. It is still the most lethal of all pelvic cancers, with less than a 30 percent recovery rate, and Radner will not be considered definitively out of the woods unless her remission continues for at least a year and a half. She chooses not to dwell on these statistics. "In fact," she says, with a defiant edge to her voice, "I think I've never been as healthy and as well as I am now."



"We call this the world's greatest club," says Radner, at



the Wellness Community with founder Harold Benjamin and ovarian cancer patient Melinda Sheinkopf. "The only problem is the price of admission: You can't get in without cancer."



For her success in confounding the obituary writers, Radner gives abundant credit to her medical care, which was aggressive, state-of-the-art and excruciating. First she had surgery; then she had nine months of chemotherapy injections; then she had four intraperitoneal washes, in which antitumor drugs, including a liquid derivative of platinum, were infused directly into her abdomen; then she had 30 radiation treatments. Says her husband, actor Gene Wilder, 52, "Each time Gilda had to go through one more treatment, and she'd be vomiting and writhing in

pain, I'd ask myself, 'How much can a human being take?'"

Had Wilder not been around, Radner is certain she could not have taken so much. He has not worked since she was diagnosed. The role of caretaker was a familiar one for him, since Wilder started his entertainment career at the age of eight by putting on skits to amuse his mother, who was bedridden with heart disease. The special demands of those early performances—gentle humor, nothing upsetting—helped define the kind of sweetly addled comedy he later became famous for. Wilder and

Radner met six years ago playing opposite each other in a murder mystery called *Hanky Panky*. (His previous screen lovers had included a dim-witted lab assistant in *Young Frankenstein* and a sheep in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, whose desertion left him sitting forlornly in the gutter, drinking a bottle of Woolite.) According to Radner, the romance was sparked by a shared passion for tuna fish—something she had to give up for chicken soup and crackers during much of her illness.

Fifteen months ago, at the sug-

gestion of psychotherapist Joanna Bull, Radner drove with some reluctance from her Bel Air home to a yellow wooden house in Santa Monica to attend a meeting of a cancer self-help group called the Wellness Community. "The last place I thought I wanted to go was somewhere where everyone else was sick too," she says. On her first visit she sat silently in a corner, her bald head swathed in a scarf that, recalls another patient, "made her look exactly like Yasser Arafat." Since then Radner has returned to the yellow house at least once a week, eventually be-



The Wellness Community's program—which includes group therapy, nutritional counseling and workshops in stress-reduction techniques such as meditation and guided imagery—is an adjunct to conventional medical care, not a substitute. "We're like an extended family," says Radner, who banters (*left*) with psychotherapist Joanna Bull, whom she also consults privately for help with cancer-caused anxiety. Community activities range from visualization training, attempted by peritoneal cancer patient William Kanoskie (*far left, top*), to Sharing Groups (*bottom*), to the boisterous Joke Fest (*above*), where the gag contributed by lymphoma patient Carrie Brumer has a wordless punch line: the removal of her wig.

coming, she says, "a true believer."

Radner hastens to explain, however, that the organization is not spiritual in nature. "It's not voodoo," she says. "It's just a bunch of comrades-in-arms united against a common enemy. I've come to realize that with all the great medical care I was receiving, and all the support from my family and friends, there was still something missing: *None of those people had cancer.*"

The Wellness Community is not a live-in facility, not a clinic, not a hospice. Its services are completely free of charge. It is supported by pri-

ivate contributions, including more than \$250,000 from its founder, Harold Benjamin, a lawyer whose interest in group therapy was sparked by his five-year involvement as a "square" (non-drug user) in the controversial Synanon drug rehabilitation program. More than 6,000 patients have made pilgrimages to the Santa Monica house since it opened in 1982; there is now a second California branch, and Benjamin hopes to establish a nationwide network. The Wellness premise (which is explained in detail in Benjamin's book *From Victim to Victor*) is simple. "There is

reason to believe," he says, "that if you participate alongside your physician instead of being a passive patient, you will augment your chances for recovery. Just as your physician may prescribe chemotherapy, we prescribe the pursuit of happiness."

The field of psychoneuroimmunology, which examines the relationship between mind and body, has become so medically respectable of late that the National Institute of Mental Health held a three-day conference last month at which more than 40 scientists gathered to discuss "Biopsychosocial Linkages Related

to Physical Health and the Prevention and Treatment of Disease." The aspect that particularly interests Benjamin is the adverse influence that stress can have on the immune system and, conversely, the positive effects of stress reduction as a tool for treating illness, especially cancer. To regain a sense of control over what psychiatrist Karl Menninger has called "an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease," Benjamin suggests that patients begin by expunging certain terms (not including "cancer," which he believes should be said without fear or shame) from



Says Radner's husband, Gene Wilder, "The Wellness Community has kindled Gilda's hope. Instead of hearing me say, 'Come on, sweetheart,' now she tells the other patients, 'Get off your ass!'"

their vocabulary: "victim," "catastrophic disease," "terminal" and even "your illness," since, as he observes, "who would want to own it?"

In addition to free group therapy with licensed psychotherapists, the Wellness Community offers free-wheeling discussion sessions that in structure and tone somewhat resemble Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. ("My name's Mark, and I have large-cell lymphoma." "My name's Carlisle, and I have multiple myeloma.") The trading of life stories, medical advice and tips on dealing with chemotherapy or radiation often continues after hours. Gilda Radner gives Melinda Sheinkopf, an artist who also has ovarian cancer, a you-can-do-it call at least once a week. "Gilda tells me to think of my chemotherapy not as a cause of pain but as a golden elixir that helps me get well," says Sheinkopf. "And she teaches me to laugh about things like how the surgical clamps in my abdomen are always setting off metal detectors, and people think I'm a shoplifter."

One of Radner's favorite Wellness Community activities is the Joke Fest, an homage to the theory advanced by Norman Cousins (who is the center's honorary chairman) in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*,

that laughter can be therapeutic. Many of the jokes are terrible, many are unprintable—and many are oncological. For instance, have you heard the one about the cancer patient whose doctor tells him he has only one more night to live? He beckons his wife to the bedroom for one last time, and she says, "Golly, Herb, I'd love to but I'm just too tired." Herb says, "Aw, come on," and she says, "That's easy for you to say. You don't have to get up in the morning."

Maybe you had to be there, which, of course, is the entire point of the Wellness Community.

Wellness participants are also encouraged to practice "directed visualization," a combination of meditation and guided imagery in which they imagine their lymphocytes, white blood cells that protect the body from disease, zapping their cancer cells. Such visualization has been proved to reduce pain, and dozens of studies are under way exploring its effects on the immune system. It would be hard to imagine a more appropriate exercise for a former Not Ready for Prime Time Player, and indeed Radner has scripted a motley set of roles for herself. In one fantasy, her lymphocytes jump up and down

and sing, "Ding, dong, the witch is dead!" In another, Roseanne Roseannadanna patrols Radner's body, and whenever she sees a cancer cell, she screams, in her most belligerent tones, "Hey! What are you tryin' to do in here, make me sick?"

"And sometimes," says Radner, "I imagine I'm in a beach blanket movie and my body's the beach. The cancer cells are the troublemakers who wear black leather jackets and rev their motorcycles and leave beer cans and cigarette butts all over the place. And my white cells are the good kids, real healthy and suntanned and blond, and whenever they see a bad guy they say, 'Get off the beach!' and then they all go surfing."

For three hours every day, Radner sits down with a notepad and works on a book about cancer. "That's what one of my very favorite visualizations is about. Every day, after I've gone through my whole body and immune system and everything, I imagine myself sitting in Doubleday's, with people lined up to have me sign my book. I'm well," she says, scrunching her rubbery face into a mass of delighted wrinkles and giving a loud Roseannadanna-ish cackle. "And I'm adorable." □

IF THOSE YOU LOVE HAVE CANCER . . .

Wellness Community founder Harold Benjamin offers the following tips:

- Treat them as much as possible as you did before the diagnosis, including continuing to laugh with them.
- Show empathy, not pity.
- Talk directly about cancer. Asking about it demonstrates you're not afraid of it.
- Include them in conversations about your own life as a way of encouraging them to feel connected to the well world.
- Be of as much practical help as you can to make their lives easier.
- Celebrate milestones such as holidays and completions of treatment.
- Cancer is not contagious. Don't be afraid to touch or hug. If the patient is your spouse or lover, don't stop your sex life. If intercourse isn't possible, stay physically close through cuddling and stroking.
- Tell success stories about cancer.
- Don't tell horror stories.
- Don't be so sure they're doomed. Remember, there are millions of ex-cancer patients.