When Penny George first discovered she had invasive breast cancer, she realized that her life was going to change. She understood about the pain of surgery and the side effects of the chemotherapy and the potential emotional trauma she might endure as she confronted the very real possibility of death. But what she didn’t know was that she would also experience a deep transformation in her own personal and professional life that would result in the establishment of a national philanthropic organization dedicated to changing the way America thinks and acts regarding health.

As Penny went through the conventional treatment, she consciously decided to use the best of what modern medicine had to offer, but to also take charge of her own healing process with the goal of “creating more health” in everything she did. She investigated many alternatives including massage, acupuncture, music therapy, and Ayurvedic pancha karma. Central to her healing process were self-reflection, spiritual growth, and deepening her sense of and commitment to community.

After she was on the road to health again, Penny—who is a conventionally trained psychologist, wife of Bill George, the previous CEO of Metronic, and a member of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, Minn.—took a huge cultural and personal risk and went on an 11-day Vision Quest in the Utah Canyonlands area where she fasted and prayed. “I returned from the desert with the growing realization that I wanted to actively direct the efforts of our family foundation to make a difference in a wider community through philanthropy,” she says.

Penny’s first philanthropic actions included funding a Healing Coach position at the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute in Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis; supporting the prostate cancer quality of life research of Dean Ornish, MD; and offering program grants to Jim Gordon’s Center for Mind Body Medicine in Washington, DC. “We were funding small changes in a massive system,” Penny says, “and then we realized that there were other philanthropists doing the same thing and that they all held the same vision we held about what needed to happen in medicine.”

Penny and Dianne Neiman, executive director of the George Foundation, decided to use some of the George Foundation funds to convene a think tank for the various philanthropists interested in changing medicine. In April of 2001, at Miraval in Tucson, Arizona, the two women brought together 25 physician leaders in integrative medicine with the same number of philanthropists. This event and the subsequent larger meeting at the Rockefeller Estate and Conference Center in Pocantico, New York, resulted in the formation of the Philanthropic Collaborative for Integrative Medicine. The philanthropists who gathered at Pocantico agreed to form an organization that would be dedicated to strategic, philanthropist-driven initiatives to advance the field of integrative medicine on a national basis.

Now 18-months old, the Collaborative has 19 members. “As a nation, we are spending more healthcare dollars and getting sicker and sicker. We believe that principles of integrative medicine as we define them are part of the answer,” says Penny, who is the current president of the Collaborative. (Bill Sarnoff served as the first president.) “Our top 4 goals are changing the way physicians are educated, increasing access to integrative care, championing physician leadership, and increasing public awareness.”

The Bravewell Leadership Award

“The Bravewell Leadership Award is one of our strategies to call attention to the fact that this is a serious field,” says Penny. “We created the term to evoke the idea of courage and wellness. It’s our own Noble Prize for integrative medicine.” The purpose of the award is to recognize,
empower, and support the champions of integrative medicine in their efforts to transform the culture of healthcare. A monetary gift of $100,000 is given once a year to a healthcare leader whose spirit, courage, and vision in integrative medicine have inspired and created change.

The Consortium of Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine

The mission of the Consortium of Academic Health Centers is to transform medicine and healthcare through rigorous scientific studies, new models of clinical care, and innovative educational programs that integrate biomedicine, the complexity of human beings, the intrinsic nature of healing, and the rich diversity of therapeutic systems. Aside from supporting the infrastructure of the Consortium, "the Collaborative has been partnering with them to create a core curriculum for medical schools," says Penny. The idea is to do away with the electives. "How do you integrate the science and first-hand experience of the mind-body connection into the first-year basic physiology taught in medical schools? That is the type of thing the new curriculum will address," she says. The Collaborative also supports development of new approaches to post-graduate physician training.

Improving Clinical Models

The Collaborative has the goal of improving access to integrative care through accelerating the growth of leading clinical centers of integrative medicine. "We are partnering with McKinsey & Co. on this project," says Penny. McKinsey &Co., a large national consulting firm, donated their services and conducted an analysis of 7 major clinics across the country. They assessed the clinics in terms of financial viability, business planning, staffing, business processes, marketing, services, etc. Their first report went to the Collaborative and advised the philanthropists on how they could best support the sustainability of the clinics. The next series of reports went to each individual clinic and offered recommendations for strengthening the specific clinics in the different areas of need.

“One of the recommendations they made,” says Penny, “was that we could leverage the knowledge from the clinics by creating a network that would bring their key people together twice a year to share information, and where we could also provide them with marketing and business plan assistance.” The first such meeting will be held in January of 2004 and Penny hopes this process will become a platform not only for shared information but also for a practice-based research network that other organizations might fund.

Public Television Special

Another strategic project the Collaborative is working on at this point in time is focused on increasing public awareness. “Remember the Bill Moyers series on Healing and the Mind and how much that did to galvanize public awareness?” Penny asks. “Well, we think it’s time for a follow-up. We are now in the developmental stages of formulating a public television series on integrative medicine with Judith Moyers as our Pro Bono coach.”

Innovation Fund

“The Philanthropic Collaborative believes that the way to success involves partnering and collaboration with other people and other organizations,” says Penny. “We create synergy and leverage just by getting people together. Our role is to be the convener.” In this spirit, the Collaborative is also starting an Innovation Fund that will give small grants for replicable, creative innovations in clinical care. Their partner in this project is IDEO, a California company that helps other companies innovate by designing products, services, and environments that provide value to their customers.

The New Medicine

Members of the Philanthropic Collaborative have written a document titled, Declaration for a New Medicine, that outlines their beliefs about the values integrative medicine should embrace. The points of the Declaration are:

1. We value the treatment of the individual in a holistic manner and the fulfillment of the needs of mind, body, and spirit.
2. We recognize the sacred and healing nature of the relationships between patients and healthcare providers and acknowledge that humanism, compassion and caring are central to health and healing.
3. We believe that the empowered patient is the responsible central actor in healing, self-care and prevention, and that a person’s emotions, trauma and stress levels directly affect the risk and course of disease.
4. We will work for a healthcare system that creates an environment that supports healing relationships and recognizes that in order to be healing and empowering, healers themselves must be restored and whole.
5. We will support truly integrative medicine that offers the highest standards of excellence across a broad continuum of disciplines, systems, and modalities.
6. We embrace the spiritual dimension of life and acknowledge the importance of context and intention in the healing process for patients, caregivers, and healers.
7. We acknowledge that the risks of many serious illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes can be reduced with scientifically-based lifestyle interventions including nutrition, exercise, and mind-body medicine.
8. We believe in giving voice to the patient, in the openness of healers, and in honest and supportive communications between all members of the healthcare community.
9. We will support the efforts of healers to develop integrity and spiritual qualities that are as important as clinical knowledge and technical skills to the process of healing.
10. We dedicate ourselves to the change necessary to bring about the new medicine in an optimal healing environment.

“Working with the Collaborative has been as rewarding an experience as I have ever had,” says Penny. “I am convinced that the principles of integrative medicine will, with our help, become part of the standard of care in medicine and that integrative medicine will restore healing to patients, health professionals, and the healthcare system itself.”

For more information about the Philanthropic Collaborative for Integrative Medicine please visit: www.pcintegrativemedicine.org.