

Donating wigs to cancer patients: a love journey across the pandemic barrier

As the last customers left Ecco, the oldest and most well-known hair beauty salon in Boston's Chinatown, Assistant Manager Amy Ping opened her locker. She took out a Ziploc baggie containing 14 inches of braids that glows softly under the light. Ping had grown her hair for over a year. Last weekend, she asked her colleagues to cut it off to give to a patient with a malignant tumor.

The pandemic made local hair salons shut down for nearly three months in 2021 because of the exposure risk. Ping, an immigrant from Taiwan, found nothing to do but stayed at home practicing her skills with wigs of all colors she got wholesale from the market.

"The wigs reminded me of the charity I once did in Taiwan. In the early days of my career, tutors regularly organized hair donations for a local charity that made wigs for cancer patients," she recalls. "Despite living in a different environment now, the demand for wigs from patients has not diminished. Why don't I keep donating?" Ping softly touched her healthy-grown hair, recalling a little kid she had seen wearing a headband crying when she went to Tufts Medical Center for her vaccination.

According to a report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced access to treatment for other diseases, leading to delays in cancer detection, diagnosis, and medication, followed by an increase in advanced cancer diagnoses and mortality in subsequent years.

"The spread of the epidemic has made cancer patients worse," said Fei Gao, staff from the Patient Service Center of the China Cancer Foundation that Ping once donated to in Taiwan. "At the beginning of the outbreak, some local hospitals suspended cooperation with us under pressure to treat COVID-19 patients first. And some of the patients who have received our donations got infected, which aggravated their disease."

In China, hospitals and local foundations usually organize mass hair-cutting campaigns monthly. Such activities, constrained by space and mobility, have drastically reduced the number of hair donations during the pandemic. However, in the United States, where individual charity actions occur, Ping has witnessed a surging number of customers who came to cut hair for donation since she was back to work.



Amy Ping, a hairdresser from Echo Beauty Salon, is in her work

"The coronavirus pandemic has made the needs of others more visible, motivating some citizens to give what they can. And even in a year when many are struggling financially, one thing they can still give, after a year with no haircuts, is hair," she said. Ping soon contacted the Long Island-based Hair We Share, which makes and provides wigs at no cost to patients with medical hair loss, to mail hairs collected from her customers.

According to Suzanne Chimera, co-founder of Hair We Share, the organization's hair donor base has increased about 180 percent over the last year. "And more men are asking how they can donate their wild, unkempt hair once they can finally get haircuts," Chimera said when three men had reached out about donating their hair in the previous 24 hours, "Before, we didn't get three men in a month."

The American Cancer Society estimated, even before covid hit, that a total of 1.9 million new cancer cases about 600,000 deaths from cancer are likely to occur in the US in 2022. But these statistics don't account for the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has likely had on cancer diagnoses and deaths because they are projections based on reported cases through 2018 and deaths through 2019.

Jeffrey Paul, founder of Wigs for Kids, an Ohio-based hair donation charity, says chemotherapy remains the most immediate and effective treatment in modern medication. Radiation and chemotherapy against cancer cells damage the scalp of patients and eat away at a patient's human craving for dignity.

"Many patients hide at home or wear a hat during treatment for fear of strange looks. Some of their families are financially strapped during cancer treatment and lack the money to buy another wig." Paul said. One latest recipient of Wigs for Kids is Ava Girolimetti, a 10-year-old Massachusetts girl diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia two years ago. She has spent hundreds of days in the hospital and relapsed twice into her fight.

Since entering the hospital, chemotherapy, daily medication, and regular sputum removal have cost Ava's family more than 40 thousand dollars. The price of wigs on sale varies from \$35 at the bottom and more than one thousand at the top. The more hand-woven, breathable, comfortable a wig is, the more expensive it is. It's a significant expenditure for Ava, who therefore doesn't expect new hair of good quality, according to her family.



A kid cancer patient and her father at the One Mission Resource Room at Boston Children's Hospital

Hair loss has long ranked among the most unpleasant side effects of chemotherapy. For cancer patients who have lost their hair due to chemotherapy, the donation of a wig can open a door of hope. Paul insists on this mission since the first day he created Wigs for Kids.

"Wigs for children with cancer need to be more than 30cm in length and have not been permed or dyed within a year, so it takes time and effort to maintain," Paul said. A wig comprises ten bundles of natural hair, giving cancer children who have lost their hair due to chemotherapy a new "real hair" to make them feel more confident, brighter, and equal in society.

Under epidemic prevention and control, hair mailed to Wigs for Kids from donors is aerated for about two days before it is taken out of its package by staff members, who are wearing masks and gloves at all times, according to Paul. Workers spray the hair with a sanitizing spray once unpacking, then clean it again when the finished wig is placed into a sealed bag to sit for at least a week before being shipped to a child.

Dr. Kristin Moffitt, a pediatric infectious diseases physician at Boston Children's Hospital, said scientists haven't studied if COVID-19 survives on hair. However, Moffitt noted studies have shown that the virus doesn't last long on other surfaces.

"It sounds like if you are putting the hair through extensive washing and a validated sanitizing process, the risk for the hair carrying the virus is shallow," Moffitt said.

Guided by an online volunteer, Ava's parents obtained her medical certificate from the hospital, filled out a list of application information, and selected bob hairstyles from photographs of more than 50 finished wigs offered by Wigs for Kids. "She decided to leave the long-hair wig for people who need it more." Ava's father said. Ava was thrilled to jump on her bed with a new wig on her head three weeks later.

The journey of a strand of hair from its original owner to another patient is often long. What contributes to the process is hard work from staff in hair donation charities.

Ping now volunteers for Hair We Share to do hair assembling and distribution work. In her opinion, this is the most complicated and laborious part of the whole team operation. But as volunteers unwrap the bags, it is clear the donors have taken care of their hair - some carefully wrapped in clingfilm, others braided and tied bows.



Volunteers from Wigs for kids are accounting and checking the newly received hair donation.

Many heartfelt messages were kept in the sealed bag sent to Hair We Share. "If there were no clouds, we would not feel the warmth of the sun. May everyone be strong," a medical student interested in cancer research wrote on a post-it note. Through these little notes and online messages, hair donors share their thoughts on hair growth and hope those cancer patients who have lost their hair can recover soon and regain a new life.

To comply with the social distancing policy during the pandemic to protect the privacy of donors, Ping was unable to see the patient put on the wig made from her donated hair.

In her expectation, beautiful long hair will give a strange girl confidence and charm. "A sick girl also has the right to embrace beauty," Ping said.

A month after the hair donation, Ping received a package when she prepared to go home from work. She opened the envelope and saw a drawing from the recipient, on which one little princess with black and thick hair is smiling big, next to a line of crooked "Thank you."