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Pole-ing It Forward

Tennessee-based Lisa Ross Parker Foundation fulfills a long-standing wishlist of Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Bone Marrow/Stem Cell Transplant unit

It all started eight years ago, after Lorie Pavao's husband, Paul, underwent a bone marrow transplant at Vanderbilt. Pavao was attending the Blood & Marrow Transplant Information Network's "Celebrating a Second Chance at Life Symposium" when she saw the patient-designed SafePole, an innovative I.V. pole. This set her on a mission.

"During Paul's leukemia trek, he was fragile and fell twice, bringing his I.V. pole down to the floor with him, once breaking a glass bottle hanging on the pole," Pavao recalled. "Those were very traumatic times for me, to say nothing of how it was for Paul. When I saw the SafePole, I knew I wanted these for future patients."

The Pavaos donated two SafePoles to the Vanderbilt unit where Paul had been an in-patient. The new SafePoles were such a hit that tensions arose among the two patients assigned SafePoles and the other patients on the 35-bed unit using the standard I.V. poles. Nurses persisted with requests to the purchasing department to order more SafePoles, but to no avail.

So, the husband of a patient decided to take matters into his own hands. "My wife, Gale, couldn't walk by herself, someone had to help her, and I watched another patient who had the SafePole, and she wasn't having that trouble," said Dennis Hubbard, a farmer from Crossville, Tennessee. "When that patient went home, I made sure Gale got that Safepole, and I saw how much easier it was." But Hubbard didn't stop there. From Gale's bedside, he called SafePole's founder.

When Cari Ugent received Hubbard's call, she knew all too well the desperation. She had designed SafePole in 2003 while undergoing a stem-cell transplant for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. To her, the standard I.V. pole was more than a routine annoyance, it was a liability. "After constantly tripping over the protruding 'spider legs,' the final straw was when I was immunocompromised and sliced my finger on a protruding screw on the pole's so-called handle," Ugent recalled. "In an effort to funnel my fear and frustration somewhere, I set about designing a new I.V. pole."

Despite no technical background, Ugent, a journalist, received international utility and design patents, and has since outfitted over a hundred major medical centers with SafePole. But even with collective applause from patients and nurses—the primary users of I.V. poles—convincing hospital purchasing departments of the need for this new design was a different story.

“The I.V. pole has traditionally been viewed as a commodity, akin to a sink or a chair,” Ugent said. “But patients aren’t hooked 24/7 to the sink or chair. And nurses aren’t constantly having to deal with tipping and dangerous sinks or chairs.”

Ugent continued, “When Mr. Hubbard called, he told me he’d up and left his farm to get his wife the best care, and he didn’t know if he’d have a livelihood or a spoiled crop by the time he returned. He said, ‘I’m not a rich man, but I’m somehow going to see to it that every patient here has a SafePole.’ It brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me exactly why I designed this.”

Back at Vanderbilt, Hubbard set about generating a petition. Inspired by his dedication, then-nurse manager Martie Steinfeld got creative. She called Janet Ross, who founded the [Lisa Ross Parker Foundation](#) in memory of her sister, who lost her battle with leukemia in 2001 at the age of 33. With the goal of assisting patients and families touched by blood-related cancers, Ross facilitated the donation of fifteen SafePoles in 2019. This month, the Lisa Ross Parker Foundation donated eighteen more SafePoles, at last completing the mission of providing one for every patient. “Every room on the myelosuppression unit now has one, and that has been our goal for a while,” Ross said. “They really are a game-changer for those patients, and I’m thrilled we were able to finally pull it off.”

“My husband and I are moved to tears to know the end of this wonderful story,” Pavao said when she learned how her donation eight years ago set off a chain reaction. “When I first saw SafePole, I signed up as its #1 fan. The organization of I.V. tubes, the adjustable handlebar for walking, the ease of transfer when a wheelchair is needed, and the convenience tray for those spectacular nurses are all wonderful pluses that a patient took the time to think of and then create!”

“There’s been so much dedication, hard work and goodwill among nurses, patients and the Lisa Ross Parker Foundation,” Ugent said. “All these people were brought together because of tragic circumstances and turned that into something so positive. That needs to be showcased—now more than ever.”

