

Building Bridges

A living legacy of leadership, teaching and support for those in need

by Rachel V. Olivier

"Ostomy surgery was the beginning of a new direction for my life," says Bobbie Brewer.

It all began with an ostomy visitor who made her aware of the difference she could make in the quality of life for other ostomates. The visitor was a positive role model who had returned to a full and productive life after a complicated and difficult surgery.

"I wanted to become involved in my local ostomy support group. Where do I begin and what can I do to help others?" recalls Brewer.

In 1965, when Brewer entered the hospital so doctors could investigate the cause of very aggressive colitis, she had no idea the turn her life would take. After several weeks, during which it became apparent that the standard medical treatments were not effective, it became clear that this was a life-threatening situation and ostomy surgery was the only option for her.

Much later, after ileostomy surgery, the complications and the return home to her husband, family and friends to begin her "new and improved life," as she now refers to it, Brewer received a phone call from Jane Walker. The gist of that phone call that started her on her new life was, "You are not alone."

"Achieving control of bowel or bladder functions is one of the first goals in our lives and now I had to learn new techniques to regain that sense of security and independence," continues Brewer. Jane was able to answer her questions and give her tips for ostomy management and ordering supplies. She assured her that she would be okay.

Where to begin?

Jane also invited Brewer to the next ostomy support group meeting of the Greater Atlanta Ostomy Association.

At that meeting, Brewer was so impressed with the leadership, support and commitment of the other members, that when she was asked to be a part of the planning committee to host the United Ostomy Association 1966 National Conference in Atlanta the next August, she immediately became involved.

The United Ostomy Association (UOA) was a fledgling national organization, having only started in 1962, yet this network of support groups helped ostomates find each other, pass on tips about self care, get information on obtaining supplies and address other issues, such as employability and insurability, being active and relationships.

Currently, Brewer volunteers with the Greater Atlanta Ostomy Association, an affiliated support group of the United Ostomy Associations of America (UOAA); it has been serving the Metro Atlanta area since 1958. She serves as chair of the steering committee and editor of the newsletter for GAOA.

The newsletter is the 'face' of the organization and is distributed to members, new contacts, ostomy nurses and medical professionals. "This is one of the most important marketing tools that we have. It is a priority and involves a strong volunteer effort," Brewer said.

"Most of our referrals come from the UOAA website and we respond as soon as possible with community resource information; add them to the complimentary newsletter mailing list and contact an ostomy visitor (if requested). Our goal is to continue and expand the support to ostomates and their families and to bridge the gap between hospitalization and independence," says Brewer.



Above: Bobbie Brewer (right) receiving the UOA Lifetime Spirit Achievement Award. Right: Brewer as UOA President at the 1983 UOA National Conference.