

Group Leader Donna Brown

# Pain Support Group Offers Hope

## Members find help for what medicine can't fix

By Gail M. Williams

Photos by Paul Zoeller

Judging by the laughter, the people entering the classroom at the Lutheran Church of the Risen Lord, Odessa, might be coming together for a social event—a reception, maybe, or a birthday party. They are, in fact, members of a support group known as HopeKeepers, and all of them are coping with some type of chronic pain. According to group leader Donna Brown, they're not in the least unusual: One in three Americans struggles with chronic pain. "Pain doesn't show," says Brown. "It's an invisible illness." Within the group, the causes of this illness vary widely; some members have depression, others rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis, and still others fibromyalgia or Crohn's disease.

HopeKeepers is a nondenominational Christian encouragement support group. Meetings open with prayer, usually followed by a devotional reading. Physical healing is not part of the program, nor is there usually much discussion of medication or treatments. "We've been diagnosed to death," says Brown, who has dealt with depression most of her adult life and is now dealing with osteoarthritis as well.

### An Unusual Understanding

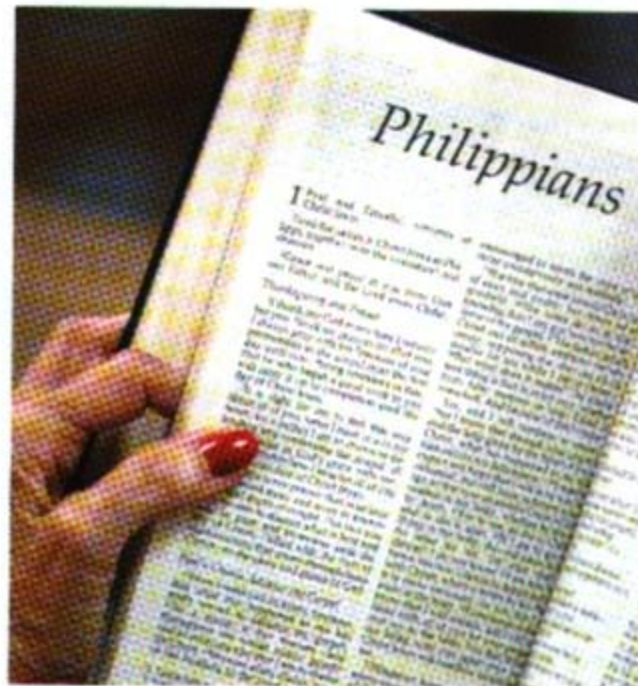
One member, Betty Sparks, recalls that she felt perfectly well one afternoon seven years ago as she did her cardiovascular circuit training at the YMCA. But she began to develop symptoms of the flu over the weekend, and by Monday, she was in the hospital with flu and a fever, fighting for breath and life. "I almost died," she says. At age 65, Sparks had to retire from her job as a credit manager. Now, at 72, she takes breathing treatments for emphysema, using inhalers four times a day.

Sparks says HopeKeepers is as important for what you don't find there as it is for what you do. "I don't need to explain why I'm ill, why I can't get well, or why I can't control my pain," she wrote in an essay. "I don't see a look on a face that says, 'Are you sick again?' I am not given advice as to what to do to make me well, or the name of another doctor or pill."

"My disease is not only chronic but progressive," explains Sparks. "I can't take a pill. I'm not going to get well." Nevertheless, she says, "People keep trying to fix me. Well, I'm not fixable."

### No Excuses Needed

"Sometimes people communicate to you that if you really believe in God, you'll be healed—or that you're being punished by God," says Brown. "That's pretty common. And that's from the people who love you, who want to help you! At HopeKeepers, you don't have to find excuses for yourself." The group fills a need that too many churches are unable to meet, she notes. "Pastors already have too much on their plates, and many church members aren't able to empathize because they haven't experienced chronic pain. We become the forgotten ones. It's not an accusation; it's simply the way things are."



Judy Brasfield, 52, has rheumatoid arthritis. Her problem has been made worse by the fact that several of the pain medications used to treat the condition have been taken off the market recently because they can cause serious side effects. "I didn't think there was any

hope until I started coming here," says Brasfield. "I had nothing to look forward to. Now I have friends, and I know my life is not over. I'm not the only one with problems." The support also helps during the most difficult times, she says. "When my dad passed away, HopeKeepers was at the funeral." She knows the truth of the conventional wisdom that you can make yourself feel better by giving to others. She is

a caregiver for members of her family, including a grandchild. "I can't do much for them, but I can be there," she says.

### Positive Focus

One of the problems with chronic pain is lack of control, says Brown. The HopeKeepers philosophy encourages its members to focus on what they can do rather than what they can't. "I was a runner, and now I can't run," she says. "But when I walk, I notice the flowers and the beautiful birds that I used to rush right past. I concentrate on the things I am able to do."

Debra Bridges, R.N., CHPN, program administrator of Home Hospice, Odessa,



recommends reading comics to give yourself a lift. She also suggests an Irish Jesuit Web site ([www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)) for daily prayer and meditation suggestions.

As for feeling in control, Bridges says knowledge is power—up to a point. “But if you get on the Internet and research [your illness] extensively, you may become so depressed that you won’t be able to get beyond it.” Balance, she says, is key.

“It helps to have a sense of humor,” says Sparks. “You get to the point where you say, ‘Hey, nothing else can go wrong. I might as well laugh.’” In her essay, Sparks wrote, “What I find at HopeKeepers are people who understand and offer me encouragement—sometimes with just a hug or a pat on the hand. There are people who are in the same boat and paddling as hard as they can—and willing to help me paddle when I can’t. People who will let me sit quietly when that is all I feel like doing at the time. That’s just a small portion of the blessings that come to myself and others who are a part of HopeKeepers.”

HopeKeepers is affiliated with a national group, Rest Ministries of San Diego ([www.restministries.org](http://www.restministries.org)). Brown is available for speaking engagements at churches and other groups. For more information, call (432) 337-6176.

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## Living with Pain

Donna Bridges, R.N., CHPN, program administrator for Home Hospice, offers the following advice for those dealing with chronic pain:

1. Make a decision to go on rather than quit.
2. Do something for someone else.
3. Knowledge is power—to an extent.
4. Find a support group and be a pillar, not the weight.
5. Plant a seed and watch it grow to learn what God can do.
6. Hang out with positive people.
7. Pray or meditate, or both, every day.
8. Have a truth teller in your life—if you’re brave.
9. Look for uplifting shows to watch and stories to read.
10. Don’t give up. Somewhere out there is someone who loves you and cares for you, even beyond Jesus Christ.